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TURN TO THE RIGHT

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TURN TO THE RIGHT

TURN TO THE RIGHT

BY

BENNET MUSSON

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NEW YORK

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1917

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TURN TO THE RIGHT

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CHAPTER I

DOWN around the loop where the race-track curved gracefully on its course to the judge's stand came sixty equine legs with fifty thousand human eyes fastened on them. On this footing, and with this attention, the reader will understand that a climax in the sport of kings was approaching.

One pair of the eyes belonged to a check-suited, slim, ingenuous and not over prosperous-looking youth of about twenty-two, who was seated in the grand stand. His name was Peter Turner, and he was deeply interested in the climax.

For three days this unfolding event had been the main topic of conversation in racing circles, the subject of many columns of reading matter in newspapers pink and white. It was Spring, the season typical of youth. Northern persons' interest in the track had lain dormant for the winter, or at best faintly stirred by meetings

in the West and South. And this great race was the race of youth—the Futurity, for two-year-olds, at Belmont Park.

This the centre of much wise gossip; of prophecy, of prediction, garrulous and oracular, confidential and mysterious: of information based on knowledge transmitted by sanguine touts to credulous betters.

And this centre of interest, this bright spot in sports, was coming to its sudden end. In a few brief seconds it would be over. Its finish was coming almost with the quickness of lightning, that outspeeds its thunderous accompaniment.

Down the stretch, out of the string of racers, three led their companions in effort. A brown mare, a rangy grey and a little black horse were the leaders, running neck and neck. So they reached the sixteenth pole, straining, outstretched, each imbued with the noble purpose of winning.

Then the little black—his small frame expressing resolution, sturdiness, determination, and above all a sort of blooded gameness that was to make him the idol of the track—began slowly to draw away from the others. The grey struggled hard, leaving the brown by half

a length, but vainly, for the glorious burst of speed of the little black widened the gap between them, and he dashed under the wire a winner by two lengths and a half.

Thus romped into racing history Firefly, pet horse of the Morgan stables. And if it were possible to qualify superlatives, he would have added to the popularity of his owner, Henry Morgan, already the most popular racing man in America.

All this was accomplished to an accompaniment of sound that started in volume like the rumble of a supernumerary army in the distance, and ended with something that sounded like a cross between a South American revolution and the reception of a home-run hit at a world-series game. Enthusiasm in the stands and on the grounds ranged to madness and then seemed to pass the range. The air was full of cheers, hats, handkerchiefs, parasols and a combined word that resembled "Morgfly!"

Amidst this saturnalia of sound Peter Turner sat in the grand stand, hunched forward, his elbows on his knees. This had been his position, except for the movement of his head and eyes, since Firefly had entered the home stretch.

And as that gallant youngster came teetering back along the track to ovation and fame, Peter's pleasant blue eyes burned with admiration and affection. Four hundred dollars at three to one meant twelve hundred won. But the biggest bet and winning in Pete's life were forgotten in his admiration and love for Firefly.

Down into the betting ring went Pete as nonchalantly as might be. The booking stand he sought was presided over by a very busy, stout and amiable Hebraic person, who received the lad's ticket and gave in exchange a roll of sixteen hundred dollars, and with it the good-natured remark: "You had that one, Pete."

"They ain't a two-year-old in the country can beat that baby, Ike," Pete responded with conviction.

"Wish you'd slipped me that before the race," said the grinning Ike, as he received the next winner's ticket.

Peter stepped back out of the crowd, drew four hundred dollars from his pocket, and added it to the recently received sixteen hundred. This two thousand dollars, being more than he had ever had, or dreamed of having,

placed him a degree or two higher than the millionaire class. He shoved the Aladdin-like wad of bills into his pocket. His feelings might be said to fit the occasion.

A friend of Peter's approached in time to see the money go into the pocket. He was short, stout, round-eyed but dejected, having the sadness that sometimes goes with fat. By occupation he was a tout.

"Did ye have the winner of the big race, Pete?" he asked.

"Sure, Jimmie."

"You been havin' a great run of luck, ain't ye?" The tone was of that forced congratulatory sort that conceals envy.

"Never had a streak like this before. In the last eight days I'm ahead of the game just two thousand bucks."

"Gee!" Jimmie's eyes grew rounder and his dejection deeper. "I wisht I'd been followin' ye. Been runnin' rotten with me. What do ye know in the next race?"

"Donno anything, and don't want to know anything, Jimmie."

"Through? What are ye talkin' about?"

"Just what I say. I always said if I had a swell run of luck I'd quit the game for good.

An' I been promisin' myself for a week that if I had any velvet left after the big race today, I was through for keeps."

Jimmie's powers of mental digestion were taxed. "Will you buy us a good-bye drink?" he asked finally.

"Sure, anything you like."

To the bar under the grand stand went slim Peter and his rotund friend. Asked to name his, Jimmy called for a whisky sour.

"Something soft," Pete said briefly.

This was a fresh shock to the sad-eyed tout. "You off the booze?" he demanded, almost with truculence.

"Sure."

"Gee! You're leakin' good resolutions. What do ye think it is—New Year's?"

"Nix, but I'm through pickin' up trouble with booze. Been on the wagon for two months—not a drop of anything—lost all taste for it, and believe me, I'm off the stuff for the rest of my life."

The tout laughed incredulously. "My ears is tired of that old spiel, Pete. Come on, have a sour."

"No."

"Two thousand bucks in, an' no booze! Just

one." Pete shook his head. "You goin' to join them shouters in Madison Square, an' whoop 'er up for temperance?"

But Peter was proof against ridicule, and, leaving Jimmie leaning sadly against the bar, returned to the grand stand. There he sat and looked dreamily across the track into the prosperous future. The board went up on the Judge's stand, with the names of the jockeys for the next race. Pete's glance rested on it, but with no responding thrill of interest. Of what concern were riders' numbers to one who had renounced betting forever?

Over the track went Peter's gaze to where, at the half-mile post, the fence showed white against the vernal freshness of the green. And Fancy shifted the scene, with a gold-inspired touch, to Peter's native village, in the rolling, garden-like hills of Westchester, near the Hudson River.

The first of Peter's visions was not pleasant; it was his leave-taking. The reality of this vision had occurred seven years before. In it was a girl named Elsie, who was young and beautiful, and whom Peter loved, and her father, Deacon Tillinger, the richest man in the village, who was cold and hard, as rich men

sometimes are. The Deacon was discovering that Peter loved Elsie and was driving him away; threatening him with a horsewhip; and though the Deacon did not strike, Peter could almost feel the bite of the whip's lash in the sting of the Deacon's words.

Next Peter saw himself leaving the village. First, at the door of the small farm house, saying good-bye to his little, grey-haired mother, who had such faith in him; to his youthful sister, Betty, and his Uncle George, and almost creeping away in the moonlight. And pausing under Elsie's window, from which the light was gone, and thinking he would return some day, rich and famous, to claim Elsie, whose love had been steadfast, and to confound her father.

Neither were the struggles in the city pleasant to contemplate. The failure to get work, the rebuffs, the loneliness, oh, the loneliness of it all! The sorrow for one's self that seemed unmanly, but was so natural to youth, and no one to whom to confide it. And with all this, the homesickness and the fear of going back and facing them all—a failure.

Then came Peter's drifting out to the racetrack, because he loved and understood horses so, and that was where the best horses were.

And probably because of this love of horses there was always some trainer to give him a job as hostler, at twelve dollars a week. And after his Uncle George died he could send his mother a little money once in a while.

Then there was good information from a trainer or a jockey and the placing of a small bet on a long shot and the consequent winning. Peter began to find words to fit portions of his visions. This seemed the rotten part of his past, for here came the booze. He'd have been home long ago if it hadn't been for the booze. How easy it had been when you'd made a winning big enough to take you back decently to soak up a few drinks, just because you got excited over a close finish. Then it got into your blood, and maybe after two or three days, that you didn't remember anything about at all, you woke up broke, and your job was gone and your self-respect was gone, too. Well, there was always some one to give you another job, perhaps because you were so keen about horses.

But that was all over now, for he'd pulled up from five bucks to two thousand, by the greatest streak he'd ever had—winning after winning, and the biggest on Firefly, the colt he loved better than any horse in the world.

When he had had the eight hundred dollars he had written to his mother that he was coming home, and now, with two thousand—there was a fortune with which to restore and rejuvenate the old farm! It would do all sorts of things which a capitalist couldn't burden his mind with at the moment.

Then there was the matter of clothes; of being properly dressed for the occasion. They would require some choosing, though Peter's present leanings were for something well-cut and nifty in the way of blue serge—with one of them thin watch-chains, with little pearls between the links.

There was nothing to take his mother in the way of a present except the silk for a dress. Why, say, she'd get more joy out of planning how it was to be cut, and consulting Mrs. Tuttle, her neighbour, about it, and biasing and goring and all them things women do to a dress. Nix on a diamond bracelet, there was more pleasure in a silk dress. And Betty? Well, kid things for Betty. He'd seen a trick toy dog that could turn somersaults, that he could carry. The rest of his truck could go in his trunk, but the silk and the toy dog he would carry in his suit-case.

And now Peter saw his home-coming. Saw himself leaping the stone wall in his eagerness, passing the old well, throwing open the door of his mother's kitchen that was so neat and homey—more like a living-room than a kitchen—and waiting for the greeting that would come. What if the dog, Ezra, were to bark, and his mother or little Betty were to look out of the window and see him before he entered? For the time of his arrival was to be a surprise.

Say, when he swung in that door what he would bring his mother, not if it was a carload of silk and ten thousand dollars, wouldn't be a patch on her joy just in seeing him, and his in seeing her—— If he could take all the faith and hope and belief in heaven there was, and sort of mould 'em into one woman's face, and add to that a mother's joy in having her only son restored to her—if a fellow could even think out those things, much less put 'em into words—he'd have something like what his mother's face would be when he went home.

With a sudden turn of fancy, Peter saw himself working around the new, old place—kicking down through the dew-laden grass, in the early morning, to the stable, where the little Jersey would greet him with great, impersonal

eyes and moist muzzle. He heard the first whirring splashes of the milk as it struck the bottom of the shining tin pail. That would be some stunt for a guy that often slept until eleven, and healthy, too.

Or down in the hayfield beyond the orchard, swinging one of them scythes that had been too heavy for him when he was a kid; and with Ezra along to rout out the field mice that he seldom caught. Moles were about his size. Then, turnin' the hay was kind of back-achin' work, and Gee! suppose it should rain!

The bugle sounded for the fifth race, melodious, shrill, imperative, but Peter, absorbed in the reconstruction of his life, did not heed it. Then a hand, with the unconscious strength of excitement in its clutch, grasped his arm, and he looked up startled, to read something more than excitement, something momentous, in the face of Jimmie, the tout.

"What's happened?" Pete asked bewilderedly.

"There's an added starter in the sixth race." Jimmie's tone was husky and confidential.

"Well, what of it?"

"It's Dealy's Spider-Legs!" Jimmie gasped

out the revelation and Peter at once took on some of the excitement.

"You mean the one we clocked Wednesday morning before daylight?"

"That's the bird. Dealy's had him under cover for two months, looking for a soft spot."

There was a pause while this information entered the breech of Pete's mind, then the next question shot out. "Lamb ridin'?"

Jimmie nodded. "You stand strong with him, Pete, don't ye? I've seen you together a lot."

Peter rose and started for the stairs, throwing a "Wait here" over his shoulder. Down he went, three steps at a time, leaving behind him a trail of good resolutions, slowly hardening into the pavement of hell.

Once in the paddock, Peter's speed relaxed, and his concern was replaced by apparent nonchalance. He sauntered about casually. All excitement or self-interest might have seemed alien to him, but for occasional sharp, furtive glances here and there when he was unobserved. He was hoping to see a maroon jacket and green cap. These were Dealy's colours, and Pete knew that Lamb would wear them.

The horses for the sixth race were being led

over from the stables to the paddock, among them a rangy bay, hooded and blanketed. It was Spider-Legs, so called because of his gangling underpinning. Still casual, Pete sauntered near and covertly and expertly eyed the animal as he passed. "Sure looks fit," was his mental summing up.

Then Peter suddenly spied the maroon and green colours, with his friend Lamb in them. He was talking to a small group of men, and Pete's air of elaborate unconcern grew as he moved slowly by.

"Hello there, Pete," Lamb called jovially.

First gulping down his joy, Peter turned to his friend. "Hello, there; you ridin' in this race?" he asked.

"Sure. I'm goin' to try to follow 'em around."

"No chance to beat 'em, eh?"

Lamb favoured Peter with a sphinx-like look. His tone was scornful. "Not unless they runs backwards," he said.

But Pete was studying the jockey's facial expression, not his words, which were followed by a slight twitching of the muscles around his right eye. Correctly interpreting this vaguest of signals, Pete sauntered away with a grin,

quickened his pace, and disappeared around the corner of a shed, with one backward look at the approaching Lamb. There Peter stopped to light a cigarette. So his back happened to be to the party as it passed, and he to be the only recipient of the message hissed out of the corner of the jockey's mouth. "This one ought to be at a long price, kid, and *he's a pipe*. Paste your last nickel onto him."

When the men were out of sight, Peter rivalled Firefly's speed in getting back to the front of the grand stand. There he beckoned to Jimmie, who volplaned to the ground:

"How about it?" he asked anxiously.

"Chance to cop a fortune."

"D'ye see Dealy over there?"

"Where?" Pete enquired.

"There, by the fence."

Jimmie indicated a tall, gaunt man of about sixty, wrinkled and weather-beaten of face, stubby and grizzled of moustache. With great absorption he was painstakingly cutting notches in the fence. He was Dealy, the wizard of the track.

"Know who that is with him?" Pete questioned.

Jimmie's excitement was volcanic. "You bet I do. That's Sweeney. He bets for him."

Peter hurried off and wormed his way through the crowd, slowing up when he was near the carving wizard. Then he leaned with studied grace against the track fence, back to back with the great one, and listened, hoping the throbbing of his heart would not interfere with his hearing.

The crowd, absorbed in the fifth race, was unconscious of the fact that Dealy was talking in an earnest undertone to his betting man. It was not a conversation to attract notice. It might have been about the high cost of living, or Dealy's carving, but when its import reached Pete's ears, he shot away to rejoin Jimmie. As they met, a roar, partly of approbation, partly of joy, came from the grand stand. Low-Ball, an eight to one shot, had won the fifth race, but Pete and Jimmie did not heed this demonstration, did not even hear it.

Peter pulled from his pocket and rapidly counted his fat roll of bills, handing a portion of it to Jimmie.

"Here's a thousand," he said. "The minute the odds are up, you go down this side of the line; I'll take the other," and Peter nodded to-

ward the long, double line of bookmakers' stands that constituted the betting ring. "Get the whole pile down on Spider-Legs as fast as God'll let you. Get all you can, but take anything you can get."

As Peter reached the first book on his side, the odds were going up on the last race. Star-Bright, a heavy favourite, opened at four to five. With what little patience the gods allot to impetuous youth, Pete waited for the odds to go up on Spider-Legs. Being an added starter, he was at the bottom of the list, so Pete fumed until the odds had been marked on every other horse. At last the bookmaker hesitated, then chalked Spider-Legs down at thirty-ten-and-five.

"I'll bet you five hundred dollars on the last one," said Pete, trying to affect the easy manner of a plunger.

"You'll what?" demanded the bookmaker, moved to a sharp inspection of the reckless one. "You want to bet five hundred dollars on Spider-Legs?"

"To win." Pete was counting the money.

The bookmaker considered. "A hundred is all I want to take," he decided.

"You piker!" Pete spoke without heat. "Make it two."

This brought an appreciative grin from the bookmaker. "Six thousand to two hundred, Spider-Legs to win," he announced to the sheet-writer.

But as Pete turned away, the bookie, who was putting the two hundred dollars in a tin box with one hand, was reaching up with the other and rubbing out the odds against Spider-Legs. And for the thirty-ten-and-five he substituted a modest ten-four-and-two. And as Peter moved on to the next book, he looked across the way and saw Jimmie leaving a stand, the bookie of which was industriously rubbing out the odds against the added starter and substituting lower figures.

The next highest price at which Peter found he could invest was twenty, and he managed to place three hundred dollars at that figure before it was erased. So in the inverted finances of the rack-track, with the price going down as the demand went up, Pete was able to place his last two hundred at no better than five to one.

Then, breathless, dishevelled, perspiring, he

fought his way out of the betting ring, and met the still more perspiring Jimmie.

"Get it all down?" he demanded.

"Yep," Jimmie answered, "but it was a fierce battle." They compared notes and found that the two thousand dollars had been placed at average odds of twenty to one. "God!" exclaimed the awe-stricken Jimmie. "You stand to win forty thousand dollars, Pete."

"Forty thousand dollars," Peter whispered with reverence. "I'm in the Rockefeller class."

The time-honoured cry "They're off!" rose from the stand, shattering the solemnity of Peter and Jimmie, who rushed down the lawn to the fence. The horses had barely started, but already one led the others by three full lengths.

"That's Spider-Legs!" yelled Jimmie. "It's all over now!"

Peter, whose stake was the greatest—though not the largest—of any on the race, looked on in silence. At the quarter-pole, the awkward limbs of Spider-Legs had carried him five lengths ahead of his nearest competitor. When he showed across the green at the half-mile post, he was seven lengths ahead, and Jimmie was moved to speech.

"He's out there all by himself!" he yelled.

At the three-quarters Lamb's colours were no nearer the next jockey's than at the half, and when the horses swung into the stretch, the dauntless Spider-Legs had increased his lead. And the string of racers came on toward the wire, the great bay beast with its human freight in maroon and green leading the others to their Waterloo.

Again Jimmie was moved to speech, combined with action. One of his hands grasped one of Peter's, the other vigorously hammered that Crœsus on the back.

"You can be in the owners' class now!" Jimmie shouted. "Have a swell string of dogs, and make me your betting-commissioner. Let's be ready to cash," and he dragged Peter toward the betting ring.

Jimmie shouted not only in exultation, but to make himself heard above the roar of the crowd, but suddenly something disturbed his elation. First came silence, the appalling silence of a multitude, then a low gasp from twenty-five thousand throats that ascended to a moan, thence to a groan.

Peter stopped in obedience to the thrill of panic which assailed him. His heart stopped, too, as he turned and looked wonderingly at

the track. He saw the field dashing down the stretch, but Spider-Legs had disappeared.

A few seconds and the race was over. Peter's eyes mechanically swept the scene and there, ten yards from the wire, lay the struggling form of the bay, lengthwise across the track; and in a limp, pathetic heap of maroon and green, huddled near the pole fence, lay the unconscious form of his friend the jockey.

So suddenly had the catastrophe come that Peter's hand was still grasped in that of Jimmie, who stood suspensive for a moment before he found his voice. "By God, he fell!" he whispered.

The day's racing was ended. The throngs surged around Peter on the way to trains, to parked cars, to the betting ring. And dully and unconsciously he moved toward the barroom, followed by Jimmie.

CHAPTER II

In the barroom under the grand stand were the stragglers at Belmont Park, drinking either because they had won or because they had lost. Peter and Jimmie joined the gathering as unconcernedly as possible, for the ethics of the track must be observed, the armour of indifference assumed—one must be a good sport. With the few dollars Peter had left he would preserve the semblance of self-respect by forfeiting the substance of it.

A bottle of whiskey between them, the friends wooed Oblivion, a wooing more arduous than usual, owing to the size of the stake risked and the hopes lost. Jimmie the tout was a bad actor, and unconcern sat heavily on him. His share of the winnings would have been at least five hundred dollars.

"Gee, if he'd only got under the wire before he fell!" he murmured dolorously.

And Peter replied stolidly, "Nix on the post mortems," and continued to drink.

The thought that he must start work again

as a hostler was not easy to down, though his good resolutions were not hard to forget. Peter's freshness and his boyish enthusiasm had made him many friends at the track. Some of these joined him, drank and drifted away; Jimmie drifted away, and dusk was coming on when Peter, his mind pleasantly befuddled by the fumes of alcohol, left the barroom.

He paused a moment outside the doorway, then decided, or rather his half-bewildered mind suggested, that it would not be inappropriate to pay a visit to Firefly. He was bankrupt through no fault of that youngster, indeed, had it not been for Firefly, Peter would have had no chance to win the forty thousand dollars. He considered the matter gravely, and it became one of importance, so with the intentness of intoxication he marched across to the Morgan stables.

He entered the trainer's small room,—with its litter of saddles, bridles, whips, and its row of hanging coats and caps, and paused. In the room was a fashionably dressed, dark youth of about twenty-three; Henry Morgan's son, Lester. He was not bad-looking, but was inclined to be curt and reserved, and this, added

to a certain shiftiness, made him unpopular at the track.

Lester was nervously pacing the little room, and buttoning a motor coat about him. He hardly noticed Peter. Finally, he went to an inner door and called, "I think I'll go home, governor. I've got my car out here."

"All right," answered a voice from within, and Lester hurried out without a glance at Peter.

The voice from within was Henry Morgan's, and Peter hesitated about going to Firefly's stall. Morgan was not an unkind man. He treated all the boys about the track with consideration, and had often spoken to Peter, who, after a few moments' consideration, walked unsteadily through the inner door.

In a roomy box-stall Peter found Firefly. A groom was bandaging the slender legs that had led that thoroughbred to victory. Henry Morgan leaned against the side of the stall, watching the operation. He was tall, handsome and rather reserved-looking, though, unlike Lester, there was no mingling of the unpleasant in his expression.

The groom continued his careful bandaging, the owner his interested inspection, and, as Pe-

ter stood by waveringly, Morgan glanced up. He was about to speak pleasantly when in Peter's solemn intentness he read signs of intoxication.

"Run along, lad," he said, a trifle impatiently.

Peter paused, however, and gulped as some half-formed expression of his admiration for Firefly came to his mind. Then Morgan glanced at him again, and Peter turned, and moved unsteadily out of the stall, through the trainer's room and into the dusk.

There was no doubt in his mind as to where he would go now. He stumbled out of Belmont Park, and across the road into a saloon. And there, and in other places, he spent the next few hours, losing neither his thirst, nor the money or credit to gratify it, and finally Oblivion was wooed and won.

About an hour before midnight Peter staggered back toward Belmont Park, empty of pockets and sick of soul. The lights from the stables blinked through a spring mist, blinked and wavered at this youth with a muddled mind, but an unerring instinct to seek the abode of his best friend, the stall of Firefly.

Peter reeled across the damp grass to the

Morgan stables. He tried the door of the trainer's room, and should have been surprised to find it open, but was not. He passed through the room and thence to the box stall.

The little black colt stepped nervously aside and greeted Peter with ears uplifted with interest. Peter placed a steadying hand against the side of the stall and threw an arm around the graceful, glossy neck of the youngster. Firefly's beautiful eyes glowed in the darkness as he gently rubbed his muzzle against Peter's breast. So they remained for a moment, Peter striving to express something of what he felt in words.

But the words would not come, so nothing was left but the sympathetic communion of youth; for after all, Firefly was only a colt, and Peter was only a boy. His grasp relaxed, he slipped down into the straw on the floor of the stall and slept. But Firefly did not sleep. Occasionally, through the hours, he swung his muzzle down toward Peter, and often he moved nervously, but always with caution, to avoid stepping on his friend.

At about nine o'clock the following morning Peter awoke, or rather was wakened by a vigor-

ous shaking of his arm. He blinked painfully at the garish light of day. His head seemed to be splitting. A stocky, plainly dressed, alert-looking man continued to shake Peter into consciousness. Behind this man—who was of the plain-clothes variety—stood Henry Morgan and the groom who had charge of Firefly.

"Wake up!" the detective said roughly to Peter.

"How did he get here?" Morgan asked the groom.

"I dunno," the groom replied. "He was here when I came to water Firefly at about seven o'clock this morning. I thought he wasn't doin' any harm and let him sleep."

"But how did he get in last night?"

"I can't tell you, sir. Must have sneaked in before I locked up."

The detective had dragged Peter to his feet, and he was drowsily resentful of this, though shamefaced at appearing before Mr. Morgan in this disgraceful condition.

"Didn't you see him before seven o'clock this morning?" the plain-clothes man asked the groom.

"Why, yes——"

But Henry Morgan, who had been looking

sharply at Peter, interrupted the groom. "That's the lad who came in while you were bandaging Firefly yesterday afternoon," he said.

"You left your money in your coat before that?" asked the detective.

"Yes," Morgan replied decidedly. "I left my wallet in my paddock-coat that I hung in the trainer's room, and when I put on my motor coat to go home I forgot it, as I told you before."

The fact that something momentous was in the air was beginning to stir in Peter's mind, as the plain-clothes man looked him up and down with growing interest, then turned to Morgan.

"What sort of wallet was it?" he asked.

"A long thin one."

The detective reached down into the straw at Peter's feet and picked up a pocket-book, long and thin and flabby, because it was empty.

"Is that it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Morgan.

"How much was there in it?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars."

The detective turned to Peter and searched

him, expertly, quickly and vainly. "What did you do with the money?" he demanded.

"I——" Peter began.

"Where were you last night?" the plain-clothes man interrupted.

"I don't remember every place," Peter faltered.

"No use talking to him now,—he's got an awful hangover. We'll try to find out later," the detective said to Morgan. "You come with me," he added to Peter, grasping him by the arm.

And Henry Morgan and the groom stood in the stable door and watched as Peter, still unsteady on his feet, and unsteadier in his mind, was led away by the plain-clothes man.

CHAPTER III

LATER in the summer, in the early morning, a prison van drew away from the New York Police Headquarters, in Centre Street, bound for the Grand Central Terminal. There the horses which drew it would turn and retrace their steps downtown, but its occupants would continue on a journey to Sing Sing: "Up the River," as the underworld phrase has it.

Peter Turner sat in the van and regarded the dull, unemotional expressions on the faces of his fellow travellers. They were about a dozen in all, including the escorting deputies, who offered nothing more enlivening in the way of facial expression than their charges.

Behind him, in the Headquarters building, Peter had left his Bertillon measurements, an impression of his finger tips and his photograph for the Rogues' Gallery, and for some reason that he could not analyse these seemed an ineradicable mark of his crime; they were like a brand that distinguished him from respectable persons.

For he was "going away" for a year, to expiate this crime; a time which to Peter's mind seemed an infinity. As he looked back at his trial, he did not see how the result could have been different, except to be worse. Henry Morgan had not been eager to press the charge against him, his guilt had seemed obvious, and he had received the lightest prison sentence possible. Anyway, it was done and over with, and at the end of all these weeks of misery was this flat, stale climax; as stale as the almost fetid air of the lower part of the city through which the van was passing.

The van passed through Fourth Avenue, and as it neared the Grand Central a new fear assailed Peter; a forerunner of all the other fears that were to follow. So far he had found, to his relief, that the alias he had taken when he began life at the race-tracks had shielded him from detection. Now, he was going where he might be recognised, for he had often taken trains at the Grand Central, on his way home.

But the van stopped at the station, and the prisoners passed through it, through the train shed, and into the train, before it occurred to Peter that at that early hour no one from his native village would be leaving New York.

On a cane seat in the smoking-car Peter sat next to a window. Between him and the aisle of the car was a deputy, impersonal, but with the underlying keenness with which his calling marked him. The other prisoners seated near-by were mostly young; none was hardened, so none was shackled; thus Peter was saved one humiliation. The train glided through the city, along the Harlem River, swung around the curve at Spuyten Duyvil, then skirted the Hudson, whose calm beauty offered a striking material contrast to the turbulence that stirred Peter's being. For it was by this route that he had come seven years before on his quest of fortune. And as the river broadened where the Palisades give way to the foothills that lead to the mountains beyond, and gained in breadth and majesty, Peter's thoughts narrowed and became more torturous.

In an hour's time the train shot through a short tunnel, an ominous tunnel, for on its river side was Sing Sing Prison, with its brick, tower-capped walls and stone façade, pierced with barred windows. It was a sight familiar enough to Peter; one inclined to dull for a moment the beauty of any day. And this day it was not only a future home, but a symbol, a

mark of separation between the hope-tinged past and the unknown future.

At Ossining Peter and his group attracted little attention as they walked over the hills to the Prison, entered the door which a guard unlocked, and which clanged behind them. Indeed, to Peter this was to be a time of clanging doors; the doors of cells, of corridors, of work rooms, that, while they barred him from liberty and the past, were not an unmixed evil, for they barred, too, the chance of discovery, which was the second fear he was to experience in this time of fears.

In the old building—built nearly a hundred years ago to fulfil the ideal of that time, of a place of punishment and repentance, rather than of restriction and reform—Peter, who had never been in a prison before, sensed the atmosphere of furtive repression, common to all prisons. It was a dull, grey atmosphere, conveyed not only by the dull grey uniform of the occasional trusty Peter saw, in his first round of formalities, but by the grey face of the trusty, behind which smouldered thoughts at which Peter could only guess.

Almost the first act of Peter's new life was the blending into grey of his person. After he

had answered a few questions in the warden's office, in regard to the details of his crime, a blue-coated keeper led him to a series of bath-tubs, frankly lacking in privacy, and there Peter bathed. At the tailor shop he parted with his check suit and all that therein was. After this he donned the rough grey coat and trousers, the heavy shoes, and the coarse cap that marked him as a ward of the state, first feeling the outrage of youth at the desecration of privacy, next the hurt to pride at the obliteration of personality that the change of clothing effected.

Following this the principal keeper pried into Peter's personal affairs, nomenclature, history and habits. Peter answered these questions with discretion, announcing himself as temperate, which, indeed, he had been for the last few weeks, and his occupation as horse-trainer, which seemed near enough to give the officials a guidance for the employment he should be assigned to in the prison. He received willingly a set of prison rules and in silence friendly advice on his future conduct.

Thence Peter went to the chaplain to receive more friendly admonition and a Bible, and answer more questions. Thence to the doctor, to undergo a physical examination and more ques-

tioning. It seemed that the state was deeply interested in statistics in regard to its wards, and Peter furnished them with respectful glibness. It was his purpose to pay the debt he had incurred to society as peacefully as possible, with as little resentment as might be. From the chaplain Peter went to a room where he was again submitted to the Bertillon measurements and to photography and to having impressions made of his finger-tips, and then, nothing having been withheld from the state that the state could acquire, he was led to a cell facing a corridor, and prepared to pay the price which society demands from those who are discovered in crime.

By what mental process the prison officials associated horse-training with basket-making Peter Turner never knew. Possibly because it did not require great skill or training, possibly because his fourteen hundred fellow prisoners satisfactorily filled the other departments of labour. Whatever the reason, Peter was led to the basket shop in time.

If he had searched among his desolate thoughts for the greatest punishment his first weeks in Sing Sing imposed, he probably would have selected the unending routine as hardest

to bear, next, of course, to the deprivation of his liberty. From the lax life of the tracks, from following his own bent, which he had always done, the transition to the deadly prison routine was appalling. In company with the other fourteen hundred inadvertent guests of the state, he rose at six-thirty, cleaned his cell, marched forth to a pallid breakfast, thence to work in the basket-shop, thence to a dinner hearty enough to shame the breakfast, again to work and after that he returned to his cell to partake of bread of fair quality and tea of doubtful antecedents.

The first effect of this régime was to rouse a stubborn spirit of rebellion, sometimes seething and boiling over into a semi-hysteria that inclined him to grasp the bars of his cell and howl forth denunciations of the social system that made such things possible, a pastime sometimes indulged in by his less self-controlled mates. Especially was this so on the interminable Sundays, when he was locked in his cell from the time immediately after the chapel service until Monday morning.

The fear of discovery was not uppermost in his thoughts then, but was replaced by another more poignant. Not many miles away was his

mother's little farm. How was she getting along without the money he had heretofore been able to send to her? There was a companionable thought to dwell with a boy for a year! The grey furtiveness of the prison atmosphere, the continual clanging of doors, the horror of the deadly routine, gave way before it. This gloomy, neat, orderly place was haunted by thoughts, sullen, resentful, vengeful, but by none more anxious or despairing than those of Peter Turner.

There was surcease from them only in work, and Peter laboured furiously at his basket-making, in the long room, under the surveillance of the armed guards, and with the companionship of the drab flock of criminals. So many of them were old, or seemed old, and at first Peter had various fancies about them.

He wondered if the criminals' seeming age was due to the attrition of the passions which they indulged so freely when they were at liberty; and to the wearing effect of that other passion, resentment, which they must have felt so keenly when they were in prison. He selected a particular face, and thought of it as one of the most repulsive sights in the world—the face of an old man, set and hardened in

the lines drawn by evil thoughts; without hope, without resignation.

His fellow-worker on his left followed his gaze and offered personal comment. "That guy you're lamping is a lifer," he said.

Peter turned with relief to the speaker, who had youth, vital, ebullient youth, as an attraction.

There was no doubt as to why this person had been put at basket-making. It was because of his exceeding skill with his fingers, a skill hitherto exercised in picking pockets, hence responsible for this and other visits to Sing Sing. When the conventions of the place demanded a name this youth was known as "Slippery Muggs." He was slim and debonair, with a jauntiness that even the ill-fitting prison suit could not daunt. His hair, rather long, fell from its parting over a brow between which, and an upturned nose, a pair of grey eyes looked interestedly and confidently at a world which was made to be conquered.

"Gee, think of bein' here for life!" exclaimed Peter, in answer to Muggs.

"Think of bein' here at all," said the gentleman on Peter's right.

He, also, was renowned in the underworld,

a fairly constant patron of penal institutions, and was known as "Dynamite Gilly." His specialty was safe-cracking, and having hitched his wagon to that star, he had cultivated an expertness which depressed bankers and confounded safe manufacturers. Gilly was shorter, stockier and quieter than Muggs, with much of the simplicity of the great artist, but none of the aloofness. Peter, Muggs and Gilly formed a little oasis of youth in this desert of seeming age, an oasis fostered by the kindly captain who had charge of the basket-shop.

"The bulls will never get me again," continued Gilly, who regarded his incarceration more as a reflection on his astuteness than as a stigma.

"Nor me," said Muggs, whose future plans were to acquire sums in the exercise of his profession that would enable him to corrupt or "square" officials of all classes.

"They won't get me," said Peter, "because when I get out of here I'm going straight."

Peter's idea of going straight was both conventional and revolutionary. The warden talked about it as a possibility, so did the chaplain and the principal keeper—so it was conventional. But Muggs asked: "What's a guy

goin' to do when he gets out—work?" "Sure," answered Peter—so the idea was revolutionary.

During the long months that dragged monotonously by Peter's friendship with Muggs and Gilly was cemented. To them he sang the song of the track—a pæan to Firefly, an elegy to Spider-Legs. All this was listened to with eagerness by this alert-minded pair, resolving itself into a phrase that appealed gloriously to their natures—"easy money."

With Peter the determination to go straight grew. It grew at night when, his smoking and reading over, he sat on the edge of his shelf couch in his cell, after turning out his electric bulb, and glanced thoughtfully out at the corridor, whose dim lighting barely outlined the bars that had at first seemed so hideous to him, and even now brought a shudder of repulsion.

Perhaps his determination might be strengthened by some breath of faith wafted to him from the little farm-house, not many miles away, where his mother might be praying for him at that moment, as she had always prayed every night since he could remember.

A series of taps on the wall would interrupt his reflections. It was Muggs, in the next cell, bidding him a telegraphic good-night. Peter

would respond to the taps, and roll over on the bunk, his chin set in determination. In the morning the great idea of going straight would be stronger—but equally strong the fear that his mother would learn of his crime.

In June Gilly went forth to freedom—Gilly, whose depth of feeling was in inverse ratio to his power of expression—who had learned to admire Peter almost as much as he did the volatile, sanguine Muggs—and to respect him more. Peter's last words to Gilly in the basket-shop had been brief, but fraught with emotion.

"You remember what I been tellin' you about, Gilly?" he had said.

"Sure, I got ye, Pete," Gilly had responded, and they parted.

In two months more Muggs' time was up, and he was to have the opportunity of carrying out his theory that the world is made up of fools to be cheated or robbed and of officials to be bribed, or to revert to Peter's principles of reform.

Peter's parting with Muggs had been no more loquacious than that with Gilly, though his final injunction had been delivered with a quieter, deeper emphasis.

"You got what I been tellin' you all this time right, ain't you, Muggs?" he had asked.

"Sure, kid, it's the only life for a guy," Muggs had responded, with his last handshake.

For two long weeks Peter was left alone with his anxiety for the welfare of his mother and sister, which seemed to grow in solitude, and on which his personal reform movement was founded. He had made no friends in the prison other than Muggs and Gilly, and though he had not taken them into his confidence about his family affairs, their companionship had lightened his burden.

Now he had only the grey, middle-aged and old men in the shops, the silent meals and the lonely evenings, with no good-night taps on the adjoining wall from Muggs.

At last the morning of Peter's release came, and having a choice of his time of leaving, he elected to go early, before any one outside was astir. Again, to the accompaniment of clanging doors, he was marched to the indelicately exposed bath-tubs, and to the tailor shop, where his check suit, now at least a year out of fashion, was restored to him. He faced the warden again, and received what he considered unnecessary admonitions in regard to his future

conduct, and the ten dollar bill that was bestowed on departing prisoners, at that time.

The routine of his exit was broken by only one incident. As an officer opened the outer door for Peter, a trusty entered from the prison grounds, and hoarsely whispered as he passed, "Two guys are waitin' for you at the Ossining Loan Company, on Main Street."

CHAPTER IV

As Peter left the prison his first feeling of relief was mingled with surprise at the trusty's message. He trudged down the hill toward the main street, wondering who could be waiting for him, who would care to come to meet him, or who even would know the time of his release. The thought that the men might be from home gave him a moment's anxiety, but he reflected that had the village known of his disgrace, his mother would have come to him before this. New York was not so far away, so it might be Muggs and Gilly. He soon would learn who it was.

The town was not awake, and the sun, creeping up over the hills, hid its light behind fleecy clouds, as though to reserve its full glory for a later bestowal on the freed prisoner.

With his sense of freedom Peter felt like one who has escaped the confines of a ship, and the sea which he hates, and once more treads the land. He looked about at the familiar outlines of the town and felt sympathy for it, as

though it were responsible for its change of name from Sing Sing to Ossining to avoid the implied contamination of the prison. His very change of clothes had brought him relief. Then he glanced down at the check suit and reflected that it almost shrieked of the race-track. He dreaded to go home in it and decided that he must try to get something quieter.

On the level portion of Main Street Peter stopped before a door over which hung three dingy gilt balls, with windows on each side of it, filled with a variety of articles, including clocks, guns, mandolins and boxing-gloves. It was the Ossining Loan Company. Peter knocked at the door, and, receiving no response, shook it impatiently.

Presently a voice came from within, spluttering objurgations and warnings, and he was admitted by a short, Jewish person in trousers and shirt, whose manner was one of vivacious protest.

"Say, vat's the matter with you?" he demanded.

"Do you run a hotel, too?" Pete asked.

"You wake me up at six o'clock in the morning to ask me this?" Sarcasm deep and biting underlay the tones.

"I got word two pals of mine were here," Pete explained. "I want to see them."

The light of memory, but not of placation, came to the pawnbroker's face. "Two fellows got a room here last night," he said, "but everybody is asleep yet. Come around in a couple of hours," and he motioned toward the door.

"I'll wait," Peter answered briefly. He glanced around the dim interior. Across the side wall was a counter, and behind this some men's clothing peeked discreetly from curtained hooks. "Got any clothes to sell?" Pete demanded.

These words affected the other's features as the soft, Chinook wind does the Western snows. He spoke trippingly and genially. "Sure. Why didn't you say so at first? Sit down, mister. I was going to get up, anyway. I'll have my wife call your friends right away." He went to a door at the rear of the shop and emitted a series of words with "Rechal" in the van, followed by gutturals and labials that fairly tripped over one another in their eagerness to escape.

The sight of the hanging clothes had inspired Peter with the thought that here was the chance

to get something less conspicuous in the way of raiment.

"I want a suit of clothes," he announced, as the pawnbroker turned to him. "Something cheap, now," he warned, as the man, with an appraising glance at Peter, turned to his collection of garments that had known other possessors.

"A cheap suit I ain't got it. But I sell you a good suit cheap," announced the merchant. Pete found no objection to offer to this, and from among the others came a suit to which Peter's compared as does the shrinking violet to the florid poppy.

"No," he said firmly.

"It's very sporty——"

"My sporting days are over. I want a plain, dark suit. Something different from the one I got on."

"I think I got here just the von," and the man returned to his goods. "Don't go vay; wait a minute," he warned, his confidence in his judgment slightly shaken.

"Second-hand will do," Peter said, as the selection was being made.

"I know—nearly new," and forth came a quiet, dark blue suit that, though it may have

seen better days and bitter nights, looked modest and fairly well-preserved. The broker broke into conventional ecstasy regarding it. "A regular chatsky! Nearly new. This is it a beautiful suit! I got it from a gentleman——"

"How much?" asked Pete, disregarding historical details.

The price of the suit was marked on Peter's personal appearance, and this the merchant studied shrewdly; accompanying his rejoinder was feigned reluctance to part with the clothes, and the expectation that their cheapness would be in the nature of a revelation. "For you—twelve dollars!" he said.

The patter of the pawnshop was no new thing to Peter Turner. In the Metropolis this sort of thing was gone through perfunctorily, as a formality whose effects were discounted in advance. This sophistication apparently had not reached Ossining.

"Let's see how it fits," and Peter slipped out of his coat and into the blue one.

"I gave thirty for that one," he said, referring to his suit.

"Sure, I believe you," answered the other, tolerantly inspecting the world-weary garments. "It's a fine suit."

"How'll you trade?"

"Trade!" cried the broker, with a ready transition to horrified incredulity. "For this rotten suit?"

"I want to trade mine for a plain dark one," Peter explained patiently.

The pawnbroker considered this matter, then spoke as one conferring a beneficence. "I do you a favour. Change yourself into this and give me eight dollars," and he extended the blue vest and trousers.

"I'll give you two."

"Five, mister?"

"No."

Matters seemed at a standstill, as though the bed-rock of sincerity had been reached. Peter fingered a shawl which lay on the counter. It was an old-fashioned shawl; one that carried with it a suggestion of grey hair done up in a bygone style, and of mild benevolent eyes with gold-rimmed glasses. It was a homey sort of shawl.

"What's this worth?" Pete asked.

The man took the shawl and expatiated. "Look! See that fringe! It's beautiful! Here," he declared, with unbelievable generosity, "I give it to you."

"Give it to me?"

"You pay me on the suit the difference and here is it a present."

And so the bargain was made that allowed Peter to go forth to reformation, properly clad. The sleeves of the coat were too long and must be altered. As Peter started toward the hall, to try on the clothes, his eye fell on the stolid features of a large composition doll, surely a pathetic object on a pawnshop counter. And as the shawl had suggested his mother to Peter, so the doll suggested his sister Betty. He picked it up and handed it to the broker as he passed into the hall.

"I'll give you fifty cents for that," he said.

A voice filled with horror and surprise followed Peter. "Fifty cents for that doll! Have a heart, mister!" Then came a pause, fraught with nothing at all, and, in ordinary tones: "All right, I let you have it for fifty cents," and the bargainer resigned himself to four hundred per cent profit.

The sun was less chary of its light, and the shop brighter, when Peter returned, clad in the emblems of his new life—second-hand vest and trousers. As the broker exclaimed at the ex-

cellence of their fit Peter gave him the prison ten dollar bill, the last token of his old life, and received his change.

And now from the hall came Muggs, bright as a new silk hat, gaily light of suit, gaudy of tie and rakish of soft hat. The friends paused in contemplation, each of the others lacking the grey, prison uniform of shame. Then Muggs rushed forward and threw his arms impulsively around Peter.

"Well, well, well! If it ain't the kid!" he cried.

"Hello, Muggs! Where's Gilly?" Peter's greeting thrilled with a joy as great as that given him by his release.

"He'll be here in a minute. You're lookin' great! Out on schedule time, too!" Muggs bubbled.

"Sh!" An instant chill enveloped Peter—the chill that was to come to him all through life at thought of or mention of the past year. He glanced nervously around the shop. An old tailor, fat, white-bearded, Yiddish, stolid and comic, had entered and was in consultation with the pawnbroker regarding the alterations to be made in Peter's new coat. "Yes, I'm out early

this morning," Peter finished, with nervous carelessness.

The pathos of this, like most pathos, was lost on Muggs, and Peter's apprehension was interrupted by the entrance of Gilly. Full awakening, like most other sensations, came slowly to Gilly. His apparel, like his nature, was more subdued than Muggs; in fact, it might have been called neutral, being black, and his hat was an impersonal straw.

Everything with Gilly was below the surface, and now, when he and Peter clasped hands, the warmth of comradeship underlying their greeting was expressed as follows:

"Hello, Gilly," said Pete.

"Hello, Pete," said Gilly.

As usual Muggs failed to fathom Gilly's emotion. "Gilly's sleep-walkin'," he said. "He'll come to if you give him time."

"Don't talk about givin' me time," Gilly growled amiably.

The pawnbroker spoke in Yiddish to the old tailor, warning him to keep an eye on the customers, and retired to his home circle.

"Where's your coat?" asked Muggs. Peter explained that he had bought the blue suit, and that the tailor was altering the coat. "What

you buyin' clothes for? When you got out this mornin', didn't they——"

"Nix on that 'got out' stuff," Pete whispered warningly, shooting a glance at the stolid tailor.

"Aw, he can't understand English," Muggs declared. "Can you, Moses?" he demanded of the old tailor.

"No!" shouted that artisan.

"You see, he admits it," Muggs said triumphantly, but Peter did not look reassured. "How soon will that coat be ready?" Muggs asked, as a further proof of the ancient's limitations in languages.

"No, no English!" cried the tailor.

"See?" Muggs demanded.

"His own talk sounds like a subway express," announced the observant Gilly.

In the world of sport it is customary to renew old associations with the aid of alcohol. It was disclosed that Muggs and Gilly were in that state of insolvency known as "flat," and Peter was invited to be their host. He offered Muggs a quarter instead, suggesting that he and Gilly drink alone. Muggs did not take in the full significance of this.

"Ain't you goin' to have one?" he asked.

"We want to celebrate your bein' a free man again."

"I ain't goin' to celebrate that way. I'm on the wagon for life," Peter answered firmly.

Muggs was incredulous. Many resolutions of abstinence were made in prison, but the idea of keeping them when one was outside was an innovation. "Aw, what you givin' us?" he asked.

"That goes—I mean it," Pete replied.

Muggs was silenced if not convinced, and Gilly was sent out for a bottle, as one gets twice as much that way, and was commanded to take his first drink on his return. Peter was deeply touched by the loyalty of his friends in coming all the way to Ossining to greet him, when the journey left them flat. However, it made the task of telling them that they were to part from him forever no easier.

"Have you got enough to stake us to breakfast?" Muggs asked. Peter assented cheerfully and offered Muggs one of the remaining dollars from the ten. Muggs refused it. "You come with us," he said. "You ain't sworn off eatin' for life, too, have you?" he added anxiously.

Peter's prison breakfast was to sustain him

for awhile, though Muggs spoke scornfully of such fodder. He accepted a quarter from Peter, and summoned the pawnbroker, who called on all the gods of trade to witness the sacrilege of furnishing two breakfasts for twenty-five cents, then went out and ordered his wife to cook them.

Gilly returned with the bottle, and the ceremony of celebration was performed. Peter again refused to drink, and Muggs treated the refusal with tolerance, knowing that time would cure all that sort of thing. Then Peter looked at his friends with emotion.

"So you fellows came all the way from New York just to see me when I got out?" he asked.

"Sure. We want to welcome you into the great world once more," Muggs answered eloquently.

"Sounds like one of them printed lines on a motion picture, but it goes," Gilly said sincerely.

"Well, what do you think of that?" Peter demanded of the second-hand atmosphere. "What an awful year! It wasn't so bad after I got acquainted with you fellows, but after you left! I've learned my lesson, you can bet on that!"

"Oh, forget it, and start over again," and it seemed that the resourceful Muggs had a plan.

In the now brighter light of the pawnshop, with the droning life of the little city passing murmuringly by, the plan was brought forth. With Muggs seated on a trunk, Peter on a chair nearby, and Gilly enthroned on the shop counter, Muggs discoursed, and Temptation entered and stood grimly at Peter's elbow, for the race-track was Muggs' theme.

"You know that horse you used to tell us about, the one you was crazy over just before you got pinched?" he began.

"Firefly?"

"Yes. Well, he's entered at Belmont tomorrow, in the big race."

"No?" Peter questioned, leaning forward, interested.

"Sure as I'm tellin' you. Now, listen. This is the scheme, see? After I got out me and Gilly talks over that stuff you was always handin' out in there about goin' straight, and we makes up our minds you was dead right. Ain't that so, Gilly?"

"Sure," agreed Gilly.

"So we plan just to wait around till your

time is up, and not to pull anything while we's waitin', see?"

"And you've both kept straight ever since you came out?" Peter asked, looking at them in admiration of their fortitude.

"Ain't done a thing—except to pinch a little change now and then to eat with," Muggs continued. "But wait till you hear the big idea! Now, we know you used to follow the races, and was wise to all the live ponies, and in soft with all the best trainers." Muggs was becoming impressive as he approached his climax. "So we dope it out that the three of us would go in together, beat the race game to a standstill, and cut out the old crook stuff. Then, right after we plan it, we finds this Firefly colt you're so nutty about starts to-morrow."

Rehabilitation through Firefly! It was a glorious thought, and Peter rose to it, but it was followed by a depressing one. "How are you going to bet on him?" he asked. "You two are flat broke and I got four bucks."

Muggs waved the difficulty aside vocally. "Let me tell you. Me and Gilly knows a place in the Bronx where we can turn a trick to-night, that will get us five hundred cases, at the very least. Now we——"

Peter's face fell with the revelation, and Temptation received a solar plexus blow. So this was the result of all his talk in the prison, and of his injunctions to them on parting! They had been obsessed by the race-track, "easy money" idea, and but faintly impressed —and possibly only out of compliment to Peter —with the idea of reform.

"Here, here, here! How about going straight?" he demanded.

"Sure, we're going straight. That's the whole idea. But we got to have a roll to go straight with, ain't we?" Muggs asked ingenuously.

"Just workin' capital, Pete," Gilly urged.

"That's no good, boys," Peter said decisively.

In vain Muggs urged that his simple method was the only one to follow; averred that the affair in the Bronx was a cinch; extolled Gilly's skill at safe cracking and his own dexterity at extracting currency from sequestered portions of guys' clothing. He said that the only chance of detection in crime was in committing it once too often; that the Bronx operation was to be their swan song; that that would be only once, and no one could call once *often*. In conclusion,

Muggs declared that his and Gilly's desire to go straight was as strong as Pete's.

"It won't do, Muggs," Peter said, with sad determination. "First, that's no way to get a roll. Next, if you get it, the chances are it wouldn't last long at the track. If luck is with you, you can win fast, but if it's against you, as it mostly is, they'll break you, and last"—now came the blow he hesitated to deal—"I couldn't go with you, anyway. I got something else to do."

There was a lull in the casual traffic of Ossining's main street. The old tailor stitched, unnoticed, at his bench. In silence the first note of separation struck on the consciousness of Muggs and Gilly. And striking deeper into Gilly's feelings, it brought its first response from Muggs.

"You mean you don't want to be seen with us?" he asked quietly.

"No, no, no! You got me all wrong." This idea seemed so preposterous that Peter could refute it quickly and heartily. He slapped Muggs on the back and turned and looked at Gilly. They were crooks, and their minds did not work as his, but their feelings did, and they would not mistake his sincerity. "Why, I think

of you two fellows as the best pals I've got in the world—that's on the square. Three people can't be together day after day like we've been, shut up in that hole, without knowin' each other inside out, and we—well, we're pals, that's all——" There was no doubting the truth of this declaration. The two received it solemnly, waiting for the cause that would follow effect.

"But I got reasons why I can't go into no scheme with you or anybody else that knew me in there," Peter went on. "This whole year that I've been shut up my one big worry was whether some one would find it out. I don't think they have, but if they did, I'll never see 'em again, because they wouldn't live through it. I didn't go by my real name on the tracks, and no one found it out when I was sent up. That's one thing I'm countin' on."

Muggs considered the human relations that would bring about this condition. "You're married, ain't you, kid?" he asked.

"No, I ain't married."

But the *cherchez la femme* idea appealed to Gilly. "A skirt," he decided glumly.

Here was something tangible against which to tilt the lance of argument and loose the

shafts of satire and experience, and Muggs began brightly.

"Yes, that's what we always thought it was —a dame. Say, the chances are you're going to get knocked cold when you go lookin' for her. I had a lot of experiences with dames, and twice I goes back, after doin' time, expectin' to have a fuss made over me. Say! they couldn't remember what my name was; passed me up like they never seen me before, and it's a good bet that's what's goin' to happen to you."

"You're all wrong, Muggs," said Peter, smiling at this misconception.

"I talked like that once," warned Muggs.

"What are you goin' to do after you see the dame?" asked Gilly.

"I'm goin' to work."

"What kind of work?" Muggs questioned.

"Anything I can get to do."

"Why, you ain't got no chance, kid. Nobody'll hire you——"

"Anyhow, I'm going to try. I love a horse, I can't help that, but I put all the race-track game out of my head when I discarded these," and Peter took from the counter the check suit that had enclosed him during his dreams of

riches and his awakening to disgrace. The ancient tailor, faithful to his trust, advanced uttering foreign protest, and bearing the altered blue coat.

"What's eatin' you?" demanded Peter. "I ain't going to swipe 'em," and he dropped the vestures of his past.

The old man helped Peter into the blue coat, the sleeves of which were now of proper length. Peter picked up the shawl and doll, wrapped in separate packages for his mother and sister. Muggs made a last appeal.

"And there ain't no use tryin' to get you to come to New York?" he asked.

"Can't, Muggs; can't even think of it." Peter turned and looked at these cheery companions of his weeks of misery. The bitterness of parting was not to be coated with assumed levity. "I probably won't ever see you fellows again," he faltered, "but I'm never goin' to forget you, and I hope you'll do what I want you to—there ain't nothin' in the other game."

The parting had a sharper pang for Muggs and Gilly than for Peter, who was going to what would be a new life, with romance and a skirt in it. They were returning to the hurdles that society places in the way of those it has

punished. Something of this was in Peter's mind, but he feared further expression of feeling. The boys were turned from him, so he knew that they shared his fear. He drew from his pocket his four remaining dollars and placed two of them on the counter.

"Here's half my roll, boys. That'll get you back to the big town," he said.

"Nothin' doin'," Muggs answered. "If you're goin' to work, you'll need all you got."

"What time does your train go?" asked Gilly, taking refuge in the commonplace.

"No train for me; I don't want anybody to see me," Peter said. "I'm only goin' a day's walk from here. I'll get there by dark, and don't want to be there before."

Gilly picked up the money Peter had left on the counter and handed it to Muggs, who had been studying the cash desk, not, it is to be hoped, with professional interest. The accomplished Muggs approached his departing friend, and, patting his shoulder affectionately with his right hand, said, "So long, old pal." And Peter did not know that the movement covered a dexterous motion of Muggs' left hand, that restored the two dollars to a pocket of the blue suit.

"Good-bye, Gilly," said Peter. Gilly returned Peter's hand clasp but did not risk speech.

"Good-bye, Muggs." The volatile Muggs' hand pressed Peter's and he turned silently away.

Peter went up to the door, his bundles under his arm. He trusted himself with another look at the boys. "Good luck," he muttered unsteadily, and plunging out into the sunshine, turned to the right toward the hills of Westchester.

The pawnshop seemed dingier than ever to Muggs and Gilly. There was a moment of silence, then Muggs volunteered, rather obviously: "Well, he's gone," but Gilly did not speak.

The pawnbroker burst into this scene of dejection, disturbing but not dispelling gloom. "Breakfast is ready, boys," he announced cheerfully.

"To hell with breakfast!" Muggs exclaimed dejectedly.

"Eat it yourself," growled Gilly, and he drew the whiskey bottle from his pocket and handed it to Muggs, that he might temper the grief of parting.

CHAPTER V

PETER hurried through the streets of Ossining, intent on leaving that neighbourhood behind him as soon as possible. It was not until he was well out on the winding Albany Post Road that a full sense of freedom came to him, a freedom of the future disassociated with urban life.

Crossing the bridge that spans the mouth of the Croton River, he struck back into the country, leaving the estates of the rich that seem to cling to the stately Hudson, and the occasional hovels of the poor that seem to shrink from it. Over the hills, along the deeply wooded steep banks of the Croton went Peter. Sometimes he stopped to rest in the cool shadow of the woods, again he paused beneath the shade of some great individual oak or elm by the roadside.

So he travelled leisurely amidst the full, almost tropical growth of late summer, back farther into the hills to where the dusty roads, hedged by rough stone walls to which the wild-

grape vines clung, led to the farm country. Occasionally he was assailed hoarsely and vituperatively by a chained dog, or regarded wonderingly and impersonally by a contemplative cow. Always he was greeted by the friendly farmer or labourer he met, and these greetings pleased him greatly, as he felt that any interest he might now excite in the city would be prompted by mistrust.

Toward dusk Peter moved slower and with more circumspection. He was approaching familiar surroundings, and had no desire to meet any one he knew, and have his arrival reported by the wireless of country gossip.

It was dark, and an insect chorus was buzzing insistently when he stopped and leaned on a boundary-marking stone wall, beyond which —the dim light showing its greyness, but concealing its shabbiness—was the farm-house which was his home.

Peter stood for a moment, the glad thrill of home-coming in his heart mingled with regret at the poverty-stricken condition that attended it. And again the prosaic fear came to him; fear that the dog would bark and warn his mother of his approach.

The wall he faced was broken by a lighted

window, the kitchen window, and from this came a haunting perfume, which Peter vainly tried to identify, closing his eyes as we sometimes do to aid memory. When he opened his eyes, he observed that the light from the window seemed unnaturally bright. Looking closer he saw that it came from a lamp on the window ledge. He puzzled over this for a moment. Why should there be a light in the window? When the reason for it came to him, he again closed his eyes to keep the tears from coming to them. The lamp must be a beacon his mother had placed there as a guidance for his return.

In fear that a further pause would bring an unmanly breakdown, Peter leaped the wall and approached the house. As he passed the old stone well, he greeted it as he might a friend. No warning bark announced his coming. He stopped at the window, and looked in. Across the homely room, by a small table lighted by a shaded lamp, sat the grey-clad form of his little mother. Beside her knelt a girl, and both were praying. Peter crossed the kitchen porch, and the perfume again assailed his nostrils, bringing a swirl of confusing memories. He knocked at the door.

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Up to this point Peter's home-coming had travelled the lines of his expectations, but now he received a shock, for the door was opened by a slim, pretty, light-haired girl of about eighteen. Peter looked at her blankly. For a moment she regarded him with the same expression, or rather lack of it, then he turned to his mother.

She rose and turned to Peter. Her face was old but beautiful, with the beauty that comes from serenity and spirituality. And with the light of recognition that came to her eyes came a look beyond description—the fruition of years of hope, of mother love, and of belief. Slowly she went to Peter, raised her arms and put them about his neck.

"Hello, little lady," he whispered.

"Joey, my Joey!" she murmured, as she kissed him. "And you came right in the middle of my prayer."

And so the alias of Peter Turner slipped from him, and he became Joseph Bascom again, and as far as a mother's love could restore him to his place in the world, he was rehabilitated.

The girl who had opened the door for him cried "Joe!" and he turned to her.

"This ain't Betty?" he faltered, with the

egotism of the returned traveller, who expects to find all stay-at-homes unchanged. And his sister confirmed the recognition by embracing him.

"Well, well, well! Why, you're all grown up, ain't you, kid?" he exclaimed, as he surveyed her wonderingly.

Betty had a certain style about her. Her lissome figure imparted it even to her checked kitchen apron and the dark, worn gown it partly concealed. She flushed with pleasure. Compliments were scarce in the village.

"Where have you been, Joe, sick?" she asked anxiously.

"No, I've been fine, never better," Joe answered reassuringly.

"Then why ain't you wrote us? It's been a whole year since we heard from you."

Joe winced, and the truth slipped from him in disguise. "You see, kid, I went away—unexpectedly," he said.

"Why?"

"Well, it was something I had to do. Couldn't get out of it," he explained.

"But why didn't you let us know?" Betty persisted.

"I was afraid it might worry you."

"But we *have* worried, Joe. We've worried terrible."

"You've had nothing on me," Joe muttered, with deep sincerity. "I'm mighty sorry, kid, but I'm back now, and you're both here, and well, thank God." He turned to his mother. "Why, little lady, I've been——"

But the little lady was kneeling at the worn arm-chair which was flanked by the small table Joe had seen from the window—her Bible stand. And she was offering a prayer of thanksgiving.

She found many things to be thankful for, things not perceptible to others in the countryside. Betty and Joe watched her in silence. The subject of Joe's return seemed to have inspired her with thoughts her heart could not contain, and that overflowed to her eyes, which were wet as Joe lifted her to her feet and faced her joyous smile.

"How have you managed to live without me sendin' you anything?" he asked.

"We've got on splendidly—had every livin' thing we wanted, exceptin' you," she declared.

The expression of Betty's face was not in accord with this declaration, but Joe was not looking at her.

"That's the best news I've heard in a year," he said to his mother. "I've imagined all kinds of things about you."

"The idea! The Lord wouldn't let us want, Joe."

Joe sighed. The portion of the past year devoted to anxious thoughts might have been spent in repentance. He was now made aware of another presence; a damp, prehensile tongue encountered his hand and two paws were pressed against his legs.

"You see, Ezra knows Joe belongs to us," Mrs. Bascom said triumphantly.

Joe turned and regarded a squat, mottled brown bulldog, who, now on the firm foundation of his bow-legs, and with one tooth protruding from a drooping lip, was gazing at Joe with the light of love in his eyes.

"Ezra?" Joe questioned, the memory of a lank, impulsive setter coming to his mind with the name.

It seemed it had been Uncle George's custom to name all dogs "Ezra," no matter how little their personalities suggested that of the ancient prophet. The setter, the present Ezra's predecessor, had suffered death at the teeth of Deacon Tillinger's threshing-machine, though

there were those who declared that the Deacon's Newfoundland had been the engine of destruction, a feud having existed between that animal and the decedent Ezra.

It was Mrs. Bascom's practice to affirm her judgment of human nature by the current Ezra's, poor criterion, as her ready sympathy went to every one, and Ezra's was on a sliding social scale that rendered tramps his especial object of regard. He could not have looked on Joe with more favour had he been a marauder come to rob the house. He now added investigation to affection by smelling of the packages Joe had brought.

"A little present I brought you," said Joe, rescuing a package from Ezra, and giving it to his mother.

"Oh, Joe!" cried she, unwrapping and holding up the shawl, which did not look so bad in the lamp light. "Look, Betty, ain't it lovely?"

Betty, duly impressed, inspected the present. "What does the card say?" she asked.

" 'Loan Bureau, Number 9,769,' " read Mrs. Bascom, with interest.

Joe hastily grasped and concealed the card. "Oh, that's nothing," he declared. "They call

it loaning so if you want your money back, or to exchange it."

"I don't want to exchange it—it's beautiful," protested the recipient of the negotiated gift.

Joe now looked shamefacedly at the other parcel, with the hope of spiriting it away in some sleight-of-hand manner, but Ezra was giving it olfactory attention. Joe gave the package to Betty.

"Kid, I got this for you," he said.

"Oh, thank you, Joe," cried his sister, seizing the package and unwrapping it eagerly. Presents were as rare as compliments in Betty's life. The staring face of the composition doll met her gaze with round-eyed stolidity. Her surprise gave way to mirth, in which Joe joined ruefully.

"You see, I'd forgotten how big you are. We won't count this. I'll give you a present later," he said.

"Oh, Joe, may I give it to Mis' Mason's little girl?" asked the generous Betty.

"Sure."

"She'll go wild over it," Betty added.

Ezra already had gone wild over the doll, and was contorting his squat body and frog-like face, frenziedly expressing a desire for posses-

sion, that was denied him. Little Mrs. Bascom beamed on Betty, on the doll, on Joe and on Ezra.

The Lord, who turned the harassing events of her drab life to blessings, had given her a slight, trim figure from which joy and peace now fairly radiated, and, one might say, cast a softening illumination over the homely outlines of the kitchen, with its rag carpet, its deal table, cupboard for dishes against the wall, and old-fashioned clock that from its shelf solemnly ticked away the peaceful seconds of her life.

"Betty's a dear, good girl," she declared superfluously. "But, Joe, how did you get here? The seven-ten ain't in yet, is it?" she asked.

"I didn't come by train."

The daring thought this suggested rendered his mother almost breathless.

"Joe, you ain't got one of them automobiles?" she demanded.

And Betty echoed this fairy prince thought, "Oh, Joe, have you?"

Joe floundered in the quicksand of untruth to which these two loved ones had led him. "No," he said slowly, "I've been walkin'."

"Joe!" cried Betty.

"Walkin'!" repeated her mother.

"Yes, I like to walk, and this is the first good walk I've had in a long time." Joe was on the firm ground of truth once more.

Whatever was in Betty's mind remained unexpressed, but this statement brought from Mrs. Bascom nothing but motherly sympathy.

"Land sakes! I should say you have been walkin'. Just look at the dust on you. You must be tired to death."

"No, not a bit," Joe disclaimed. "It was great, comin' through the country, seein' all the trees and brooks and flowers. Here, here! I'll do that," he added, for his mother had brought a wisp broom and was starting to remove the dust from the blue suit.

Betty placed the doll in the cupboard, safe from the leaping Ezra. Out on the porch Joe removed the marks of travel with the brush. The long-drawn notes of the night chorus of insects were punctuated by the sharper chirp of crickets, and by the occasional sardonic croak of a frog proclaiming his suzerainty over a pond in a hollow beyond the road.

The haunting perfume that had assailed Joe before, mingled with the scent of the verdure. The sense of smell is said to affect the memory more than others because it connects more

directly with the brain, and again Joe vainly tried to identify this fragrance.

"Say, what was that I smelled when I was going past the window?" he asked.

"Oh, that was a mess of my peach preserves," his mother answered.

Joe smiled, in deep satisfaction. Had he known the part the preserves were to play in his future, he probably would have salaamed. They were known to the countryside as "Mis' Bascom's jam," which was of a flavour that other jams, local and foreign, attained not, nor even approached.

The little woman cooked it in an adjoining woodshed, where, during the heat of summer, her stove sought refuge, owing to the warmth of its personality. This jam of the gods was prepared in an iron pot, into which went sliced peaches and lemons, sugar and such material components, supplemented by love, faith, charity, goodwill to men, trust, Christian forbearance and a few other spiritual ingredients. Hence the result, fit for but undeserved by the gods.

The remembrance of this dainty sharpened Joe's appetite. He returned to the kitchen and spoke genially of the jam. "Well, believe me,

it's some mess," he said. "Huyler's would smell like a delicatessen compared to that. I noticed it way down the road. Is that perfume, or is it to eat?"

This speech delicately conveyed to Mrs. Bascom that which brings a sharp pang to a mother's heart—the hunger of a son. In an instant she was all contrition. "What am I thinkin' of, I wonder, standin' around here?" she demanded, overwhelmed with self-reproach. And she put a small hand on each shoulder of the sufferer and looked wistfully up at his face. "You're hungry, ain't you, Joe?" she asked.

"Well, a little," he confessed. "Have you and the kid had supper?"

"Yes, but we can get you somethin' in a minute."

"Don't go to any trouble."

"Trouble, trouble!" There was a tender pain in thus defining the feeling with which she would prepare food for Joe. The idea was so whimsical that a smile welled up through the pain. "Why, that's real funny, Joe," his mother declared, the subtlety of the humour being such that it brought tears with the smile.

"Can't I help?" Joe asked.

"Land sakes, no!" Mrs. Bascom protested,

as she and Betty began to set the table for the coming meal.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son it is alleged that, on his return, his father set forth a fatted calf. This must be true, as had the Prodigal's mother provided the feast, she probably would have set forth an ox. The thought of food suggested to Joe the question of how two unprotected females had contrived to exist during his time of imprisonment.

"I can't understand how you managed to get along all this year. How did you do it?" he asked.

"Oh, Deacon Tillinger gave us all the credit we wanted," his mother answered buoyantly.

"Tillinger!" Joe exclaimed.

The idea of associating kindness with the Deacon seemed like coupling mercy with a forty-two centimetre gun. Had it not been for the Deacon and his horsewhip, Joe would have stayed at home, and so would not have known the shame of prison. The only good thing Joe could find to say about him was that he was the father of Elsie.

For Deacon Tillinger was stingy and acquisitive, controlling the local trade with his country store; spreading out tentacle-like loans

that grew to enfolding mortgages and sucked the pecuniary blood from many borrowers. Yes, Deacon Tillinger was of a temper that led him to want many things, and of an astuteness that enabled him to get them.

"Oh, he was awful good, Joe!" Mrs. Bascom went on.

"Well, can you beat that?" Joe searched for a reason. Perhaps time had softened the Deacon. No, the answer was written on the gentle face of Mrs. Bascom. "Anybody'd be good to you, little lady. They couldn't help it—even Tillinger," Joe said.

"We've gone into debt——" Betty began.

"Don't let that fret you," Joe waved the trifle away grandiloquently. "I'll get even with Tillinger first thing I do."

This seemed to bring a disproportionate joy to Betty. "Oh, Joe, will you?" she cried.

"You bet I will," Joe said earnestly.

"Oh, maw, do you hear that?" demanded Betty. "It's all right now, Joe'll pay him. Won't you, Joe?"

"Certainly I'll pay him," Joe replied to this unflattering repetition.

Betty might be said to bubble with relief. "Oh, that's fine!" she sighed. "He was goin'

to take this place and make us get out and move into that miserable Jones house. And now we won't have to. Oh, maw, I'm so happy! He's to bring over all the things for maw to sign to-night. You know; that'll make him own the farm—but now you can pay him, and maw won't have to sign them."

So it was out! Hope and confidence deserted Joe. The farm was slipping from beneath his feet. How was he to lift the weight of debt to the Deacon with the lever of good intentions? If it had been small enough to negotiate, as he had thought at first, yes, but now—— This jumble of thoughts, that made the moment the most wretched of the whole wretched year, was interrupted by the impulsive Betty.

"I'll run right over to Tillinger's store and tell him you'll pay him," she said.

"Hold on," her brother interrupted, stopping her. "I—I'd better see him myself."

And there was his little mother, the figure of faith, calmly continuing to set the table for the stalwart son who had come to her rescue.

"Now, Betty, do let's give your brother time to turn around and get his breath before we

bother him with all our worries," she admonished.

From the depths of Joe's misery came a sobbing note of self-abasement; then, with resentment against the Deacon, the hopeful thought that perhaps he might be taking the farm for a trifling amount.

"How much do we owe Tillinger?" he asked.

"We can talk about that after you've had your supper," his mother replied.

"Do we owe him as much as that?" Joe said, so dismally that his mother laughed.

"It's a lot," Betty declared impressively. "One hundred and twenty-eight dollars and sixty cents."

"Is it?" Mrs. Bascom enquired in anxious surprise. "Where's the bill, Betty?"

Betty took the deadly document from a table drawer. "But there's three dozen jars of jam to come off of that," she announced. Deacon Tillinger sold Mrs. Bascom's jam for her, on commission. "That's thirty-six times ten—thirty-six dollars," Betty computed. Then she corrected herself sadly. "Oh, no! It's only three dollars and sixty cents! That leaves just one hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"He was going to take this place on account of a piking hundred and twenty-five dollars?" the rescuing son demanded scornfully.

His mother sighed admiringly. "I don't suppose a hundred and twenty-five dollars seems much to you," she said.

"Oh, no, it ain't nothin' to me." Joe was again scornful in this disclaimer.

The reasons for Mrs. Bascom's and Betty's misfortunes follow: Peaches had been the specialty of Uncle George, Mrs. Bascom's brother, who had what was called "a knack of growin' fruit." He had planted five of the farm's hilly acres with peach trees, had attended them devotedly, and now possibly they were honouring his memory, for out in the moonlight they were laden with the largest crop in their history.

In former years Deacon Tillinger had sold the crop for Mrs. Bascom, but this year he found himself unable to dispose of it at any price. And the philanthropic Deacon always had thought the farm too big for two lone women, anyway; hence, the charitable arrangement by which he intended to take it off their hands and install them in the Jones cottage.

How the Deacon had gained possession of said cottage was hidden history, but could be

surmised by his method of getting anything else he wanted. Mrs. Bascom opined that she and Betty would be real comfortable in the cottage, but Betty—who sometimes failed to share her mother's optimism—declared it was a shack.

And now the shack, down in the hollow near the pond, was to remain tenantless, echoing the sepulchral voice of the bullfrog. Such was the result of having a long-lost son return unexpectedly. Joe summed up the situation.

"You're going to stay right here," he asserted, indignation at Tillinger lending him belief in himself.

His mother was suppressing happy tears. "It will be lovely for you to pay the Deacon when he comes to-night," she said. "The thought of leavin' here has almost broken Betty's heart."

"It's almost broken yours, too, but you wouldn't let on," Betty responded rebelliously.

Mrs. Bascom's heart, long made impregnable by faith, now thrilled with sympathy for her hungry son. "Here we are, standin' around and lettin' Joe starve to death," she cried remorsefully.

Betty would get the supper, her mother

would get the supper—they would both get the supper. So the daughter retired to the woodshed, followed by the mother, leaving the son to absorb and reflect on the look of love and trust she gave him as she went.

With their going went Joe's burst of confidence, and a pecuniary spectre came, that took the form of one hundred and twenty-five dollars. He drew his last remaining dollar and some loose silver from his pocket and computed. "One twenty-three, sixty-five shy," he muttered. It was some situation. Mechanically his hand went to another pocket and encountered money. Two one dollar bills! Hurriedly and hopefully he searched the other pockets of the pawnshop suit. It yielded no assets.

Then Joe smiled as he recalled how at parting with his friends, in Ossining, he had shared his roll with them, and divining how the money must have been restored to him, he murmured, "Muggs!"

Well, something must be done. Joe wandered thoughtfully around the familiar room, his eyes on the rag carpet, with its big medallion in the centre and smaller one near his mother's Bible stand. He stopped at the win-

dow, where the beacon lamp, forgotten in the household's new-found happiness, still faithfully cast its yellow rays out into the summer night. Joe smiled sentimentally.

At the sink, by the window, Joe regarded the pert, little green iron pump. It had not changed with the years. He gave its handle a friendly shake and laughed at the resultant splash of water, possibly in remembrance of the time when it had been necessary for him to stand on a chair to reach that handle.

And there, where the wide, brick chimney trespassed on the room, was the shelf from which his mother's clock in its peaked case looked down at Joe with a face undimmed by time.

"Hello, clock, I remember you," he said merrily, and the clock responded by marking off a few seconds of his life.

Well, memories were pleasant if times were hard. And in the corner where his mother's Bible stand stood, with her easy chair beside it, they clustered thicker than elsewhere. There at her knee he had listened with childish reverence to the wonders she had read from the Great Book. Joe approached the stand and

lifting the Bible opened it tenderly, but slammed it shut as he read on a page devoted to the family record:

"Joseph Bascom, born April First!"

CHAPTER VI

JOE went to a cupboard and took from it a pitcher. A rotund, earthenware pitcher, with two blue stripes around it. A pitcher that had survived the mishaps of the years and had escaped the traditional dangers of journeys to the well, with which it was associated in Joe's mind, and to which he now took it, to fill it with the cool, clear water that lurked in the stone-inclosed depths.

The moon climbing over the eastern hills tinged the maples that lined the road, whitened the stone walls that confined it, and beamed on the five acres of orchard with their luscious but unprofitable fruit.

Between the kitchen porch and the orchard stood the well, a sentinel against drought, encircled below its curb with its seat of stone. Joe lowered the bucket and filled the pitcher. Ezra, who accompanied him, sat and looked at the moon, giving no expression to the thoughts with which that luminary inspired him, and has inspired his kind through the ages.

As Joe stood, the pitcher resting on the well's curb, and regarded the silver-touched hills that sloped away to a world of disillusionment and sorrow, the pink-clad shoulders of a girl, surmounted by a graceful neck and a head crowned with a mass of brown hair, appeared over the road wall. She approached, entered the wall's opening, and stopped, evidently in surprise at the sight of a man on the Bascom place. She stood uncertainly, and that abettor of sentiment, the moon, had the pleasant task of illumining her beauty, which the startled look in her eyes accentuated.

"I beg pardon, I——" and she was about to turn away when surprise was succeeded by recognition and that in turn by bewilderment, as she gazed at Joe.

"Elsie Tillinger!" he cried.

"Joe!" She approached him impulsively, with joy in her eyes, and a proposed form of greeting that the moon must have approved.

The first feeling inspired in Joe by this sight of his boyhood's sweetheart was a realisation of his unworthiness, and it impelled him to draw back shamefacedly. Then he extended his hand and took hers.

"How do you do, Miss Elsie?" he asked weakly.

"Miss Elsie?" she repeated, in surprise and reproach.

A cloud obscured the moon as if, with well-timed prescience, to withhold its sentimental light, and Ezra, able to give his attentions to sublunary affairs, wagged a friendly tail.

There was an awkward pause, and Joe laughed embarrassedly as he said, "Well, I thought I ought to say that now. I almost said 'Miss Tillinger.'" There was another pause, during which the situation was not relieved, and Joe took up the fatal task of explaining. "You see, we're grown up now, and I—I—Oh, I'm so glad to see you I don't know what I'm talking about!" he broke off impulsively, which was much better.

"I'm just beginning to get my breath back," Elsie declared. "I can't seem to realise you're here. Did any one know you were coming?"

"Yes, I did." Joe laughed and Elsie laughed, too.

"But no one else—not your mother or Betty?"

"No, I surprised them."

"How happy they must be!"

The girl laughed again and sat on the well seat and looked up at the boy. The cloud, relenting, withdrew from the moon. The dog turned from the humans and again considered the heavenly body. A bird cheeped sleepily in a nearby maple.

"Oh, Joe, it's been the longest time since they've heard from you," Elsie said.

"It seemed like a lifetime to me," Joe responded, with conviction. "But it's over now," he continued, with less feeling, "and everything here looks just the same; as if I hadn't been away at all. Why, when I came by here, tonight, the old well looked so familiar that I bowed to it. Here, where you stood that night, Elsie, the last time I saw you."

"Yes," said Elsie, and turned aside.

Across the hollow, through which the road followed a course of least resistance to the river, was the green-clad hill she and Joe had gazed at, that night, and which filled Elsie's thoughts now.

"I remember the dress you had on," Joe was saying. "It wasn't as long as this one——"

It was not really a hill that Elsie was looking at, it was an island; an island surrounded by beautiful dreams—those she and Joe had

dreamed on the night of which he spoke. For it was on the hill that their mansion was to be built when he returned, triumphant and rich, from his struggle with the world. Looking down at her, Joe saw where her eyes were fixed, and memory gave him another pang. He laughed almost harshly.

"—but you look now just as I imagined you would, only a lot more so," he finished impotently.

Elsie laughed a bit too, as it seemed the best way of concealing her pain, but there was an undercurrent of reproach in her voice when she said, "And you've never written to me in all that time."

"I couldn't, Elsie, I——" he strode a little way in the uncut grass, and when he turned to her again his tone was lightly conversational. "The last I heard of you you were away at school," he said.

"How did you know?" Elsie asked brightly.

"Mother used to write me; every letter had something about you."

"And I used to get her to read me your letters, before they stopped coming. And then I'd always hear of the splendid way you were getting on."

"Yes," and Joe ground his heel into the grass.

"How you went to church so regularly; what a fine man the minister was—and your friends were all such good, religious people."

Joe loved the raillery in Elsie's voice, and praised heaven for giving her a sense of humour, but shook his head sadly. "And mother'd believe them?" he asked.

"Yes, and I was so glad you wrote them. They'd make her so happy."

"That's a fine way to make her happy," Joe answered bitterly.

"It was much better than to get no letter at all," Elsie said sorrowfully.

"Elsie, I never wrote you because—because I was a failure—a miserable, hopeless failure!" Joe cried.

Elsie rose as if in surprise at the thought that this could make any difference to her. "But, Joe, you're young! There's plenty of time to start over again," she said.

Her spirit of bravery gave Joe hope. He eagerly came close to her, near the well. "You think so?" he asked.

"Of course there is," the girl declared, sweetly emphatic.

He looked over to where the Hill of Dreams —now the Hill of Lost Hopes—was enwrapped in the witchery of the night. Beyond it was the Hudson, broadening on its way to the sea, and passing the tower-capped walls of the prison. The thought chilled him and his voice trembled. "I wonder," he said.

Betty swung the kitchen door open, and tripped down to the well in search of the forgotten pitcher, which rested on its curb.

"Hello, Elsie!" she cried joyously. "He's back."

"So he's told me," Elsie answered, smiling. "I don't suppose your mother's happy."

"Almost out of her mind," Betty said, capturing the pitcher, which her brother promptly took from her. "Oh, don't go," she added, as Elsie turned away.

But Elsie was determined. "This is no time for callers," she said. "I only came to ask you to stop for me on your way to meeting, but probably you're not going now."

"Oh, yes, we are, and Jessie Strong's comin' over." Jessie was Betty's chum.

"Then why don't you stop for me?"

"All right," agreed Betty.

"I'm awfully glad you're back, Joe," Elsie

said in farewell, and paused at the opening in the wall. "Remember what I said."

"I'm thinkin' of it now," Joe replied.

"Perhaps you'll come to meeting?"

"Perhaps; I need it."

"No doubt," Elsie said, with laughing emphasis, and turned gaily down the road.

Joe looked after her, thanking heaven for many things about her, aside from her sense of humour, and followed Betty into the house. But Ezra, unmoved, continued his inspection of the moon, reading in it the message of the ages of which humans have no understanding.

CHAPTER VII

Up the road from the village and through the opening in the wall came the chubby figure of Sammy Martin, Deacon Tillinger's head—and only—clerk, bearing on his arm a basket of empty preserve jars. He passed between Ezra and the moon, favoured only by a flicker of the tail from that student of astronomy, deposited the basket on the kitchen porch, knocked and entered.

"Howdy, Betty?" he said. "Can I see your maw?" Then he turned in surprise to the stranger.

"Hello, Sam," Betty answered. "This is Joe. Don't you remember Sam Martin, Joe?"

Joe faced the plump, short, red-faced youth, clad in overalls that the inclemency of many seasons had rendered neutral, and a shirt that always had been neutral, and memory slapped him in the face with the recollection of a shock-haired, slender boy of fourteen.

"Hello, Sammy, how are you?" he asked, repressing his unflattering reflections.

"As well as anybody can be that works for old Tillinger. Say, he's closer than the next second. You goin' to stay here now?"

"Sure."

Sam glanced at the closed door of the kitchen whither Betty had gone to summon her mother from the chicken which was broiling for the prodigal. "Well, all I can say is," he declared, "that if I owned this village and hell, I'd rent out the village and live in hell. They'd be more opportunities for a business man there."

"So you're a business man, now?"

"Tryin' to be."

Betty returned with her mother, who exchanged greetings with the would-be merchant.

"I brung over them preserve jars. They're on the stoop. What'll I do with 'em?" he asked.

"You can leave them right there, thank you, Sammy," Mrs. Bascom replied. Isn't it grand to have Joe back?"

"Grand. Old Tillinger told me to bring back all the jam you got ready," said the business man, and Joe realised, as all travellers must, how soon local interests will take precedence of interest in them.

"*Deacon* Tillinger, Sammy, or *Mr.* Til-

linger," Mrs. Bascom corrected in gentle reproof, as she returned to the kitchen for the jam.

"*Deacon* or *mister,* huh!" Sam grunted as the door closed. "If I called him what I thought of him I'd be put out of the church."

"What makes you work for him then?" asked Betty.

"Who else is there to work for here, unless you go farmin'? His store is the only one in the village you can call a regular store."

"Well, if I was workin' for somebody, I wouldn't go runnin' him down," Betty declared.

"I suppose you think he's all right because he's a pillar of the church?" Sam demanded.

"Well, whatever he is, his daughter is a friend of mine, and I don't want to hear nothin' against him," Betty rejoined.

Joe leaned back on the window ledge in enjoyment of this sally and in admiration of the pretty, wilful spirit Betty seemed to have developed; also, with a touch of the amused tolerance one of metropolitan experience gives to country affairs. The business man considered Betty's last rejoinder, then indulged in a transition.

"Oh! have you seen her feller?" he asked, with suddenness.

"Whose fellow?"

"Her'n, Elsie Tillinger's, the feller 'twas courtin' her while she was at school."

Joe's smile of tolerance vanished, and his hopes of a future with Elsie drifted out into the night, even as did the perfume of his mother's delectable jam. Of all the sorts of fool he had been, the greatest was the one who thought that a girl of Elsie's charm would go uncourted through the years. Elsie's interest in him, evinced a few moments ago, was, of course, impersonal. It probably would not have been less had she known that he was a freed criminal. Well, here was the second blow of the evening to be taken standing. Sam and Betty clattered on, unconscious of the heart-stabbing they were inflicting.

"How could I have seen him?" Betty demanded, referring to the "feller."

" 'Cause he's here visitin'."

"What! How does he look, Sam?"

"Great! I never see such a swell feller!"

" 'A swell feller!' " Joe reflected bitterly. What else would Elsie have but a social paragon; what less did she deserve? A guy with

three dollars and sixty-five cents, and a prison record, was a fine contrast to the aristocrat Elsie was worthy of.

"You ought to see him lookin' over the store," Sam continued, and carried away by the impression he was making on Betty, he essayed an imitation of the unknown fiancé. " 'Quite extraordinary, isn't it? I declare, I declare!' " Sam waddled about the room, his round, red face at an angle that enabled him to inspect the imaginary wonders of the Deacon's store. " 'One can get most anything here, by Jove!' " Sam finished, with a smile appreciative of his own cleverness.

"That's like Englishmen talk in books. He ain't English, is he?" Betty asked.

"No, but he's swell American society—that's just as bad."

"Is he handsome, Sam?" Betty was eager for details.

Sam considered. "Well, he ain't so pretty as he is swell," he decided.

"How long is he going to stay?"

"I dunno, but it'll be as long as old *Mr. Deacon* Tillinger can get him to, you can bet on that."

It was astonishing how disagreeable Sam

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Martin's voice had grown with the years, Joe thought, as that raconteur continued to tell, with loathsome details, of the doings of Elsie and her suitor.

"This afternoon Tillinger drove 'em around in his buggy. Showed 'em your maw's peach orchard, too. The three of 'em was all squeezed on one seat, him on one side, Elsie on t'other, and the Deacon between 'em, so they couldn't hold hands, or nothin'," and Sam chortled at this *faux pas* of his employer.

Fortunately for Joe this absorbing recital was interrupted by the entrance of his mother with Sam's basket, now delicately laden with the last mess of jam, which she gave to him.

"There you are, Sammy," she said. "Tell the Deacon that's all I got this evenin', but I can give him plenty more to-morrow, now the jars have got here. I'm stewin' a new mess to-day."

"Want anything at the store?"

"I guess not, thank you, Sammy."

"You ain't ordered hardly nothin' lately, but I suppose you'll be orderin' a lot now Joe's back," the tactless Sam said hopefully.

At this additional stab Joe turned, leaned his elbows on the window sill and looked out.

His mother mistook his feeling for hunger. "That chicken'll soon be ready, Joe. I had to fix it for you. Mis' Strong sent it in this afternoon," she said innocently.

Joe winced at the neighbours' "sendin' in" process, disclaimed hunger, and hoped that he was rid of Sammy Martin at last, but that enterprising youth was regarding the jam-filled basket with an intentness that boded another transition.

"I wish you'd change your mind about that proposition of mine, Mis' Bascom," he said.

"What proposition, Sam?" Betty asked inquisitively.

"Of lettin' me sell the jam for her. Why, if she'd only give me the chance, I'll bet I could get her twice what the Deacon pays."

Mrs. Bascom smiled somewhat wearily, as at an oft-repeated tale.

"Why, Sammy, the Deacon knows what jam's worth a great deal better than you and me. He's been in the grocery business all his life," she said.

"Course, he knows, but he ain't lettin' on to you."

Mrs. Bascom was shocked by this *lese majeste*. "Why, Sammy!" she exclaimed.

"No, he ain't, Mis' Bascom. Why, I could tell you somethin' that would make your hair stand up—only—I can't, 'cause I'm a business man."

Joe reflected dully that Sam already had made *his* hair stand up, and wished that he would go.

"You mustn't say anything against the Deacon, Sammy. Why, you know what the bill is I owe at the store, and he's never once asked me to pay it; and he's always sold the peach crop for me and never charged me a penny for doin' it," Mrs. Bascom declared loyally.

"Well, if he is as good as all that, he oughtn't to mind if you get more for your preserves, had he?" Sammy demanded.

"If you want to sell them, Sammy, why don't you speak to the Deacon about it?"

"Not much!" said the business man emphatically, starting for the door. And Joe hoped he was at last rid of him and his jam and his business and his observations.

"Why don't you let him try, if he wants to, maw?" Betty persuaded.

"I wish I could, dear, but the Deacon

wouldn't like to have Sammy goin' to his customers."

To Joe's disgust Sam now returned to the fray, and cried eagerly, "I won't sell none of it around here."

"You won't?" Mrs. Bascom asked in surprise.

"No, ma'am, not a jar."

"Oh, well, I don't see any harm in it then——" Mrs. Bascom temporised.

"Let him try it, maw," Betty urged.

"Aw, go ahead, Mis' Bascom!" Sam interjected.

"All right, Sammy. If you don't sell any of it in the village, I'll be glad to have you."

"Good! Much obliged, Mis' Bascom," and Sammy seemed fairly ecstatic. "I'm through with Tillinger to-night," he announced. "People think I don't know nothin', but I got a chance to show 'em I'm a business man now,—a great chance!" and inflated with self-importance he dashed out of the kitchen.

"Sammy's a real good boy," Mrs. Bascom sighed, "but sometimes I don't think he's quite right in his mind."

"I think he is. He meant something, you see if he didn't," Betty answered sanguinely.

But her mother shook her head and sought the belated chicken in the woodshed. Joe, heavy with his woes, hoped that in seeking a distant market for the jam Sammy would try Patagonia. Betty fussed around the table for a moment, then before joining her mother she unconsciously gave Joe a last, harrowing stab.

"I wonder if the Deacon meant Elsie and her fellow to live in this house when they get married?" she mused. "But they can't do it now!" she added triumphantly, and departed.

CHAPTER VIII

EZRA's gaze was still fixed on the moon, that in her celestial course was now mirrored in the pond, over which the bullfrog sounded his occasional note of possession. Perhaps the dog read in the satellite's face a forecast of the events which were to occur with bewildering rapidity at the Bascom Farm.

Two more figures trod the road, coming from the south; furtive figures, lacking the confidence of Sam Martin or the grace of Elsie Tillinger, and advancing with diffidence bordering on caution. They paused opposite the kitchen and sniffed appreciatively, this pantomime making it evident that the heavenly perfume of Mis' Bascom's jam had brought them hence.

The eye of one of them fell on the ominous figure of Ezra—motionless in his observance of the moon—and he burst into awed speech. "Gee! Pipe the dog," he said.

Tokens of disrepute were evident enough in the twain to arouse Ezra's friendliness. When

his eyes discerned them, his countenance opened cavernously with what passed with him for a smile. He rose, and slowly his tail moved in approval from northeast to southwest. Thus was confidence established between kindred spirits.

"Hello, sport!" said the smaller of the two, and Ezra advanced, wriggling a token of greeting to Muggs and Gilly.

Their journey from Ossining had been circuitous. For persons without capital, method of travel from the prison town to New York is limited to walking or swimming, neither of which had appealed to them. But the deep-thinking Gilly had suggested coming by freight, and they had sought transportation in an empty box-car. While they slept the irony of fate had switched this car to another division of the road, and the gods of destiny had side-tracked it near the village. Muggs and Gilly's legs, their hunger and the scent of the jam, had done the rest. They approached the kitchen door confidently, followed by the complacent Ezra, and knocked.

When Joe opened the door he received his second great shock since his mother had started to boil potatoes. "You two!" he cried.

"Well, I'll be——" began Muggs.

"Pete!" exclaimed Gilly.

"Sh!" Joe hissed, looking fearfully at the kitchen door. "What the devil do you mean by following me?"

"We didn't follow yer," Muggs protested.

But Joe was sceptical. "Don't try to kid me," he said.

"No, on the square, we didn't," Gilly declared.

Then they recounted the mischance of their journey from Ossining, and their advance on the Bascom place in search of a "hand-out," but Joe was unconvinced.

"Too bad, boys, but you'll have to take a sneak," he said.

The light of comprehension came to Muggs' face. "Oh, this is where the dame is," he confided to Gilly.

"Sure," affirmed Gilly.

Muggs was lost in wonder. "Well, what d'you think of that? A rube dame! Come on, Gilly," and he started for the door.

"I'm sorry, boys," Joe said.

The heart interest of the situation appealed to Gilly, and he paused. "Was it all right,

Pete? She hadn't forgot yer?" he asked, with feeling.

"No," Joe answered impatiently.

Gilly grasped Joe's hand and spoke with sincerity. "We didn't mean to butt in, on the square we didn't——"

And at that moment Joe's mother entered fatefully from the woodshed, bearing a dish of lettuce. "Joey, do you like——" she began, and "Oh!" she finished.

She stood with the dish of lettuce, the only unembarrassed one of the quartet, and beamed benevolently and welcomingly on the astounded hand-out seekers. Slowly their hats came off, and in their hardened natures the spirituality that radiated from Mrs. Bascom found strange refuge. For a moment they stood thus, then Joe began a stumbling introduction.

"Little lady, these are a couple of pals of mine—business acquaintances. This," indicating the subdued Muggs, "is Mug—M—Mr. McCarthy, and this," designating the impressed Gilly, "is Mr. Gilbert. Fellows, my mother."

Mrs. Bascom placed her dish on the table and advanced cordially on Gilly. "I'm real glad to see you, Mr. Gilbert," she said, taking

the hand that had confounded safe manufacturers.

"Thank you, ma'am," said that expert, much embarrassed and gulping down feelings he could not analyse.

"And you, too, Mr. McCarthy," and she clasped the fingers so adroit at extracting coin from guys' clothing. Muggs bobbed a sort of half courtesy, expressive of embarrassment and of his idea of social amenities. "Won't you step right into the parlour?" Mrs. Bascom continued hospitably.

"Oh, no, ma'am, no. We—we got to be gettin' on," said Muggs.

And Gilly added awkwardly, "We're in a sort of a hurry."

"Oh, ain't that too bad!" Mrs. Bascom was disappointed. "Joe, I hope they ain't goin' because they took me by surprise," she said. Then she turned to the embarrassed pair. "Joe didn't tell me you was comin', but he only just got here himself, and I h'ain't given him a chance to tell me much of anythin' yet," she explained.

Gilly searched his soul, and this is what came from it: "Well, you see he didn't know we was comin'."

"Oh!"

"No, ma'am, we blows in—unexpected." Muggs' manner was courtly now.

"Surprised him."

"Yes'm," said Gilly.

"Well, ain't that nice!" and Mrs. Bascom's beaming pleasure in the situation was not shared by her son. His feeling was of relief that the worst probably was over. Then his mother heaved a hospitable bomb. "Won't you stay to supper?" she asked.

"Supper!" As Muggs spoke he staggered at the thought.

Gilly glanced at Joe who was inscrutable, and his soul brought up the darkest lie of its history. "Well, we're much obliged, ma'am, but we ain't exactly—er—hungry," he said, and the intruders started to go.

Joe reflected on their heroism, felt that Gilly's lie might be white, after all,—as starvation could not be called hunger,—and relented. "I guess you better stay," he said. "You can spare that much time?" he asked solicitously.

"Oh, that'll be lovely, and Joe won't have to eat alone." His mother was delighted.

Muggs and Gilly, studying their friend to see whether insincerity lurked in his politeness, re-

ceived a reassuring gesture from him. "Come on, stay," Joe added.

"Why, sure, if he's got to eat alone, we'll keep him company." Muggs was magnanimous and appealed to Gilly. "Won't we, Mr. Gilbert?"

"I—I don't mind," Gilly agreed, not to be outdone in generosity.

"That's real kind of you. Just set right down; I won't be no time," and Mrs. Bascom hurried to the woodshed.

There was silence for a moment, then Muggs spoke with repressed feeling and almost dreamily. "Your mother—gee! And we thought it was a dame! Say——" He sought in vain for words descriptive of the impression the little woman had made on him, then glanced around the room and his thoughts returned to earth. "Can't we clean up a little?" he asked.

At the kitchen sink, where the marks of many a day's honest toil had been removed, Muggs and Gilly erased the stains of dishonest travel. Joe watched them, speculating on how their bizarre personalities would fit into his home life. "Fellows, I'd rather drop dead than have my mother find out about me, and

your being here scares me to death," he said finally.

"Listen, Pete——" began Muggs.

"Nix on that Pete! My name's Joe—Joe Bascom—and I'm in business."

"What sort of business?" asked Gilly, wiping his guilty hands on an innocent towel.

"I dunno—just business. Don't try to make it one thing or another. You live in New York, but don't give any address, see?"

Gilly considered this and cast the towel from him into the sink, then realising that this was not the thing in domestic circles, he rescued the towel and spread it on a rack, with careful deliberation. Muggs approached Joe and spoke earnestly. "We got yer. Don't think we're goin' to get you in wrong. Why, I'd rather cut my throat than have *her* get wise."

"Me, too. Perhaps we'd better duck now," Gilly said.

"No, wait for the chuck, but for God's sake be careful!"

A vagrant breeze wafted into the room a scent which had been wasting itself on the Westchester air, and it assailed the nostrils of Muggs, who traced it to the kettle in the win-

dow. "That's it, that's the stuff that brought us here," he cried, pointing to the kettle.

"That's what it is," Gilly agreed, going to the magic potion. "We smells it way up the road, and follows the scent."

"She made it, didn't she?" Muggs asked, obviously referring to Joe's mother.

"Sure."

"Somehow, you'd know it was her," and again Muggs was dreamily reflective.

"The way she smiles at us, that's what I'm thinkin' of," murmured Gilly, his voice soft with sentiment. He held up the hand that the little lady had clasped, and wonderingly went through the pantomime of greeting. " 'I'm real glad to see you, Mr. ——,' " then he broke off in sudden panic. "Say! What's my name?" he asked anxiously.

"Gilbert, Mr. Gilbert," Joe recalled, after a moment's thought.

"Yes, Gilbert. Have I got a first name?"

"What's your own first name?"

Gilly's mind reverted to a half-forgotten childhood. "When I was a kid they called me 'Dudley,' " he announced.

"Mine was Lucius," Muggs volunteered.

Joe smiled. "Dudley Gilbert and Lucius McCarthy," he denominated them.

"All ready, boys?" came the mother's gentle voice, from the outer regions.

"Some voice!" Gilly murmured appreciatively.

" 'Boys!' " Muggs repeated softly.

"Sit down, fellows," Joe broke in.

Joe and Muggs seated themselves at the table, and Gilly was about to do so when the door opened and Betty appeared, a dish of potatoes in her hand, a look of pleased expectancy on her face. Gilly, who faced her, paused in a stooping posture and viewed her with admiration and surprise. His attitude caused Muggs to turn, and that nearly reformed character received a jolt—or bolt—from Cupid, who possibly was hiding behind the preserve kettle. The jolt left Muggs with his eyes fixed on the shy girl.

"This is my sister, Mr. Gilbert," said Joe.

Gilly straightened, recalled the ethics of his new surroundings, and extended his hand.

" 'I'm real glad to meet you,' " he quoted from Mrs. Bascom's greeting, but as Betty did not relinquish the dish of potatoes for the extended fist, Gilly lowered it self-consciously.

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure." Betty was a trifle prim in her pretty glibness.

"And Mr. McCarthy," Joe continued.

"So am I," said Muggs, who, of course, was ignorant of Cupid's act—or even of his personality. The immediate effect of the inexplicable glow that filled him was to add to his politeness, and he rose, lifting his chair with him. "You take this chair," he urged, holding it about three feet from the floor for Betty's better accommodation.

"Oh, no, thank you. Maw and me have had supper," and Betty fluttered about the cupboard and table, as her mother entered with a platter of chicken.

"Sit right down, boys. Land sakes, I'm calling you 'boys,'" said Mrs. Bascom, slightly confused by her boldness.

"That's all right, mother. They don't mind," said Joe.

"Oh, no, ma'am," Gilly hastened to add.

"We—we—like it," confessed Muggs, beaming absorbedly on Betty.

Mrs. Bascom paused with the platter of chicken, brown and white, broiled and tender, and as Joe reached for it she spoke admoni-

torily but gently. "You ain't asked a blessing, Joe."

Joe bowed his head. Muggs alertly realised that this ceremony called for co-operation and did likewise. Gilly observed this strange proceeding, and the closed eyes of Betty and her mother, and his face sank slowly over his plate. Joe mumbled those parts of his formerly used ritual that he recalled; the blessing though faulty in rhetoric was not lacking in sincerity, and he ended with a confident "amen."

Muggs had kept a half-opened eye on Joe, and was able to raise his head at the proper time, he and Joe having that shame-faced look of relief usual after a blessing. But Gilly's head remained bowed in devotion until an admonitory kick from Joe brought him up, sharing the smiling look of relief, the psychology of which will one day be explained.

One needed no day's tramp of country roads nor travel in a box-car to appreciate this meal, served by love and beauty. It aroused more awe in Gilly than the blessing. The chicken has been referred to; the potatoes were served in white, flaky mounds; the lettuce was crisp and upstanding, the bread home-made, and the

butter in its moist yellowness suggested cool, hidden places. All these were served unsparingly, and partaken of in the same spirit.

"Wouldn't you boys like a nice glass of milk?" Mrs. Bascom asked.

"Well, I ain't never used it much," Muggs confessed.

"Well, now, try that," and from a large, white pitcher Mrs. Bascom filled a glass with the strange fluid, and Muggs sipped it tentatively.

"Gee, that's swell," he said. "Ain't there nothin' in it but milk?" he asked wonderingly.

"Phœbe gives real good milk," Mrs. Bascom said laughingly.

"Phœbe?" Muggs was puzzled.

"Yes, she's a Jersey."

Muggs associated milk with early morning hours, in which it stood in sentinel-like bottles on window sills, or in doorways, or travelled in large, rumbling wagons. As he thought of this, he was partly enlightened in regard to Phœbe, as he often had seen "New Jersey" on the wagon signs.

"You'll have a glass of milk, Mr. Gilbert?" Mrs. Bascom asked, but Gilly was solicitous about the supply.

"Have you got plenty?" he enquired.

These city people were queer, with their strange ideas and tastes, and Mrs. Bascom smiled—which she might not have done had she known how queer her guests really were.

Betty, who was afflicted with a shyness that the occasion did not seem to warrant, approached Muggs with a jar of jam. "Will you try some of maw's preserves?" she said.

"Is that what we smelled?" he asked.

"I guess so; maw's been cookin' it to-day."

Muggs experimented again, and pronounced an instant and emphatic verdict. "Say, that's too good to eat. It ought to be set in a stick pin," he declared.

Betty laughed with more politeness than understanding, but Gilly, impressed by Muggs' indorsement, reached for the jam, helped himself liberally to it, and devoted himself ecstatically to it and to the chicken. Mrs. Bascom stood by, filled with the joy that sometimes is felt by good women when they watch men eat.

"Have you got everything, Joe?" she asked.

"Everything, mother," and he turned to her lovingly, "and it's bully, too." He regarded his two friends who had behaved so circumspectly. Homeless and dauntless were they,

though hungry they soon would not be. He thought of them spending the night in a barn, or with no shelter but the mysterious and mosquito-haunted woods; but he spoke lightly and carelessly.

"I've been thinkin' I might get my friends to change their minds and stay over night," he said.

"Won't that be nice? I do wish you would."

"Have you got a place for them?"

"Why, yes, Uncle George's room, if they don't mind sleeping together."

The glorious and unthought-of proposition left Muggs and Gilly speechless. The idea of their sleeping together being a hardship was so quaint that, as they looked at each other, they failed to digest it mentally. Then Muggs spoke.

"Oh, no, ma'am. We don't mind," he said.

"It's a nice wide bed. Uncle George died in it," Mrs. Bascom declared in recommendation.

Muggs readily turned the sad event to a personal comparison. "Well, Uncle George'll have nothin' on me," he said.

Thus was hospitality exercised to its utmost and accepted with gracious appreciation. The diners were nearing repletion. The clock

ticked away the seconds leading to momentous moments to come. Ezra, extended on the floor, his head between his paws, slept and dreamed fitfully of the chase or of heavenly bodies.

In the pause Mrs. Bascom's mind reverted naturally to good deeds and her eyes sought a jar of chicken broth, which she had prepared for a neighbour who was "ailin'." "Now, the boys'll want to talk, Betty; you can get ready for meetin', and I'll take that broth to Mis' Tuttle," she said, and Betty started for her bedroom.

"Good-evenin', Mis' Bascom, and—and—thank you." Muggs had risen and addressed Betty with punctilio.

Gilly, who also had risen, sought in vain for the polished expressions that flowed so readily and unexpectedly from his pal, but his face expressed much. Betty's pretty air of formality was slightly accentuated as she said, "You're welcome, I'm sure," and departed.

Mrs. Bascom, the jar of broth in her hand, a shawl over her head, was prepared for her errand of mercy, when a thought assailed her.

"Joey, dear, can't you come to meetin' with us?" she said. "It would be so nice on your first night home."

"Why, of course," Joe answered heartily.

"Perhaps you boys would come, too?"

Gilly required enlightenment. "Where is it at, in a church?" he asked.

"No, it's in the chapel."

"Oh," said Gilly, still unenlightened.

"We'll take a chance if you want us to, won't we, Mr. Gilbert?" Muggs broke in gallantly.

"Sure."

"Oh, that's lovely," and Mrs. Bascom bustled happily out.

At the sound of the closing door Ezra opened his eyes and blinked toward it, effectually expressing the fear that he might have missed something. The three continued to eat. They were moved by different thoughts. Muggs was the first to speak.

"I've had some swell dreams in my life, but nothin' like this," he sighed. Again they ate and again Muggs' thoughts came to the surface. "What about havin' us guys in church, kid?" he asked.

"It's all right, I guess. It would make an awful hit with her. What do you think, Gilly?"

The note of personal sacrifice was sounded in Gilly. "Go to church? Why, I'd go to hell

for that old lady!" he announced, with conviction. "She—she—she——" he tried in vain to extract from the depths of his nature some of the feeling with which the little woman had inspired him. "No wonder you was worryin' all last year," he finally said to Joe. "I never seen no one like her."

Muggs, on his side of the table, was summoning visions with which he mingled in spirit, apart from his friends. "Betty," he murmured, unconsciously. Joe and Gilly regarded him blankly and he awoke with a start. "Betty," he repeated, in the lightest of conversational tones. "That's your sister's first name, ain't it, kid?"

"Yes, that's it." Joe's tone was unenthusiastic.

"I was just tryin' to remember it," and Muggs turned gaily to the food, as though surprised that the effort had made him neglect it. "Suppose the gang could see us now, wid our milk and jam," he continued.

"I didn't know there was such chuck in the world," declared Gilly.

"Us lookin' for a bum hand-out and fallin' up against this Tiffany food," said Muggs.

"And how can a place be so clean?" Gilly

marvelled. He rose and with ostentatious care filled his glass again with the hitherto unappreciated milk.

"It's quite a farm. Got a big peach orchard on it. Finest fruit in the State," said Joe.

"And you're goin' to stay here an' run it?" Muggs asked.

"I was—but I don't know now," Joe said hesitatingly. It was not a pleasant after-dinner topic, but the boys were his friends, and friends might well resent the false delicacy of keeping to one's self a burden which would be lightened by the telling. So he went on, "Just before I came, my mother and the kid was figurin' they'd got to get out."

To Gilly the idea of leaving heaven would not have seemed more of a catastrophe, and as for Muggs, a personal element of sentiment in the situation moved him to the core of his being. He exchanged looks with Gilly, and spoke.

"What's the matter?" he asked tensely.

The matter followed hopelessly, translated into New Yorkese by Joe for their better understanding. "Well, my mother owes a bill to the village Shylock, see? And before I am wise as to how she stands, I make her think I'm

loaded down with coin and can settle everything up for her. Then I find out this guy has got it all framed to take this farm—I don't know exactly how, but I know him, and it's a pipe he's doped out some way he can do it by law."

"How much do you need?" Gilly asked eagerly.

"The bill my mother thinks I'm goin' to pay to-night is a hundred and a quarter."

Here was a problem of apparent difficulty, but so easy of solution that Muggs did not even hesitate. He rose briskly, and started for his hat. "When's the next train for the Bronx?" he demanded.

"Nothin' doin', Muggs," responded Joe firmly.

But Muggs was moved to argument. "You needn't be in on it. Gilly an' me'll have a roll for you as soon as we can get there and back."

"Sure," urged Gilly. "I'd commit murder for that old lady."

"Sit down, sit down, both of you," Joe commanded. "I know you'd both go through for me, but I wouldn't let you. I'm going to talk with this old guy first and see if I can work it out some way. It's no cinch goin' to him because we love each other like a couple of

rattlesnakes. I ran away from home on his account."

"How was that?" asked Muggs, intensely interested.

This part of Joe's recital came first with reluctance, then with bitterness. "Well, I—I used to like his daughter. Now, I've got to go to her old man and beg for mercy."

"But if he turns you down and you can't give him that hundred an' twenty-five bucks to-night, your mother will get wise that you are four-flushing, won't she?" inquired Muggs.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Gilly, whose mind had been groping in the dark and had at last come to the light, demanded suddenly: "Has any one in this burg got a hundred and twenty-five dollars?"

"Only this guy we owe it to—he's got a barrel of it," Joe answered sadly.

"Where does he keep his barrel?" Gilly thirsted for information.

"I could take it out of his shoe and he'd never feel it," Muggs boasted.

"Aw, what are you talkin' about?" Gilly broke in, scornful in his superior knowledge. "Them rubes don't never carry a roll—they bury it."

But Joe was firm in his refusal to take advantage of their talents. "I wouldn't stand for anything like that; and if I would, you couldn't get near any of Tillinger's coin," he said.

"If he keeps any of it in this town, Gilly could." Muggs searched for a fitting tribute to Gilly's accomplishments and decided on: "Why, that guy taught Houdini all he knows."

Gilly kept his mind on the main chance. " 'Tillinger,' is that his moniker?" he asked.

"Yes, Deacon Tillinger."

"What is he, a farmer?"

"No, he's got a big store, groceries and most everythin' else. I've got to go and see him now and try to keep him away from here. I'll be back in a few minutes, so if mother comes in tell her I've gone out for a walk."

Taking his hat, Joe reluctantly went out. He was preceded by the uninvited Ezra, who dashed ahead, gleefully investigating the thousand and one wonders of known and unknown scents offered to a dog by the wastrel night, that seemed to have nothing to tender a returned prodigal, except anxiety.

CHAPTER IX

JOE started rapidly for Tillinger's store, but gradually his pace slackened, and he moved with a speed commensurate to his desire to meet the Deacon. He regretted that he had not asked his mother on what terms Tillinger expected to get the farm, and what details pertained to the one hundred and twenty-five dollars he had so lightly waved away; he regretted that he had assumed his attitude of scorn for the amount, and that—but, after all, regret belongs to the past, and his concern was with the immediate future.

Joe then began to devise vague plans by which he would confound the Deacon, but the nearer he approached the store, the less effectual these seemed, and the slower Joe's pace became. Perhaps the Deacon would not be in! The light was gone from the store. A few steps more and it appeared again, having been concealed for the moment by the oak that graced the "Johnson Place."

Joe watched Ezra, who was hunting enthusi-

astically for things that prowl in the night, and was diverted for a moment. This rather fat bulldog certainly was out of the picture in the country, though one could imagine him following a college boy across a campus, or being led down the Bowery by a prize-fighter. His method of hunting was to locate his quarry in a yard or field, by the sense of smell. He would then run along the adjoining fence or hedge until he found a convenient opening, through which he would dash in pursuit, and expect to find the quarry waiting for him on the other side. And countless disappointments did not daunt him. Gee, it was great to be a dog, and have eternal hope!

Opposite Tillinger's store Joe paused for a last consideration of his campaign of rescue. The old-fashioned frame building loomed forbidding in the darkness as a dentist's office. The light from its window was softly malevolent in its yellowness; soft because it came from the office in the rear, where the Deacon evidently was. Trust the Deacon not to burn two lamps when one would do as well. And as Joe looked, the light went out. He heard voices and drew back into the shadow, ashamed of his feeling of relief, for Tillinger and some one

else were groping their way through the store.

As they came out, Joe heard the Deacon's harsh voice rasp out some reference to the seven-forty train. Joe hoped he was going to the City, but that could not be, with the business of securing the Bascom place unfinished. He evidently was escorting the unknown person with him to the train. They climbed into the Deacon's buggy and drove creakingly away.

Here was a respite for Joe and he walked slowly off, turning into a path that led to the hill on which he and Elsie were to have built the house of their dreams. There, seated on a boulder, he gloomily devised more plans with which to thwart his sweetheart's father.

Deacon Tillinger drove toward the station, his linen coat flapping in the evening breeze, his neck outstretched, his nose extended. The Deacon always moved briskly, as if either to keep pace with that discerning nose, or to avoid falling down. He just missed being portly and he just missed being thin, but he missed little else. His shrewd eyes, peering from a face habitually screwed into an expression of speculation, seemed to direct his brain to boring the depths of a bargain until it reached the point of the other fellow's disadvantage. The

Deacon had inherited the store and cleverness from his father, and he had developed both bequests.

With him was a young man, dark, suave, fashionably dressed, who was not English, but "swell American society, and that's just about as bad." He was Lester Morgan, Henry Morgan's son, the suitor Elsie Tillinger had met when she was away at school, and this was his first visit to the village.

The Deacon pulled up before the Bascom farm and viewed it with a proprietary air. Lester Morgan sniffed appreciatively.

"What's that? Smells great!" he exclaimed.

"Kettle of Mis' Bascom's preserves. The stuff we been talking about, and that you sampled at the store," the Deacon answered.

"By Jove, it's ripping! I never tasted such stuff before. No wonder you say it's a big opportunity."

"What do you think of the orchard?" asked the Deacon.

"It's wonderful," and Lester gazed covetously at the acres of moonlit trees.

"You won't find peaches like those nowhere else in the country," the Deacon said. "Sister Bascom's brother, Uncle George, they used to

call him, planted them trees years ago, and he fussed and dug around 'em right up to the day before he died."

Lester Morgan was interested. "And you're really willing to turn the place over to me?" he asked.

"That's what I said," and the Deacon drove on.

"You don't know what this chance means to me, Mr. Tillinger."

"Well, no, I don't exactly. Why a young fellow with all your money should want——"

"That's it. I haven't got any money."

"What?" In his astonishment the Deacon jerked so sharply at his old grey horse that it would have stopped had it not been labouring under the delusion that it was going to the stable.

"Not a dollar," Lester confessed genially.

"Why, your father is one of the richest men in America."

"Of course, my father's got tons of it."

"I should say so," and the Deacon waited for further disquieting revelations.

After a moment's thought Lester spoke. "Well, this is the situation, Mr. Tillinger. I'm very fond of your daughter."

"I can't say I blame you for that."

"She is a beautiful girl, and—a—do you think I stand any chance with her?"

"Well, I guess you'll have to find that out for yourself," the Deacon answered, almost with coyness.

"I want to find out. I want to ask her to marry me," Lester said earnestly.

"Why don't you? I ain't got no objections." The Deacon's statement was ambiguous. What he meant was that he had no objections up to the present.

"I'm afraid, on account of my governor."

"What could he have against Elsie?"

"Oh, no, it isn't that!" Lester cried. "He'd love her—he couldn't help it."

"See here! Ain't you and your father on good terms?" demanded the Deacon, turning and facing his glib companion.

Lester hesitated a moment, and considered whether he should continue with his "glittering generalities," or resort to the truth, at which he often hesitated. "No, sir, we're not," he said finally. "In fact, Mr. Tillinger, I've left home."

"What! Left home!" The startled Deacon

again jerked the horse, which stopped, as it had passed the stable and hope.

Having decided on the truth, Lester was all engaging frankness. "You see, my governor has very strong ideas. He thinks I ought to work and get along on my own——"

"And I agree with him," the Deacon interrupted quickly.

"Well, I confess I never did until I fell in love with Elsie. Then I realised that my father would never consent to my getting married until I'd done something to show I could make good. But I knew that if I disappeared and went to some out-of-the-way place, so that no one would find me or hear of me, and then, after awhile, I came back to my father with some money, that I'd earned myself, without any help from him—why, it would make such a hit with him that he'd be glad to have me marry, and he'd give me anything on earth I wanted."

Lester finished in a burst of enthusiasm. During his speech Tillinger, realising that the horse had stopped, had clucked it into reluctant action, possibly fearing that the visitor might miss his train. He now considered the young man's plan at length.

"Yes, I see," he mused. "Well, I'm willin' to help you, but there won't be no engagement until you and your father have made up," he finished decidedly.

"Of course, sir. I prefer it that way, and I want to earn some money first."

"Well, there ought to be a lot of money in them preserves, if the business is handled right."

"I should think so. It's lucky those people haven't thought of it or they'd never have sold the place to you."

"Oh, I'm treatin' Sister Bascom fair," the Deacon hastened to protest. "This ain't nothin' she could do. It's goin' to take money and business sense to develop the preserve business, and she ain't got neither. Why, she hardly gets enough out of the peaches to pay the interest and taxes."

"Then how does she live?"

"Well, Sister Bascom had a wayward son——"

"Like me, eh?" Lester interrupted, now playful in his frankness.

"He used to be always hangin' around Elsie——"

"Still like me," and Lester pulled the frank stop out further.

"No, I put a stop to that, and right after that he ups and runs away. He was a good-fer-nothin', no-account brat."

From a purely psychological standpoint it was remarkable how the Deacon's opinion of Joe differed from Mrs. Bascom's. As the horse jogged on Tillinger favoured his visitor with a short account of Joe's misdeeds, flavoured with pithy, personal comments.

He told how Sister Bascom felt terrible after Joe left home, but never let on, smiling and saying it was a good thing for a boy to go out into the world and fight his own battles, and she knew he would make his mark. Mrs. Bascom's fortitude was unappreciated by Lester, and excited only scorn in the Deacon, who declared that if Joe had made his mark it didn't show much.

Further, it seemed that for a time Joe had sent his mother money to live on, and when his letters stopped, she had written to various Young Men's Christian Associations, and to different ministers, at such centres of piety as Sheepshead Bay, Baltimore and New Orleans, with no effect.

The recital was fairly spicy, and ended with an account of Sister Bascom's misfortunes, that culminated this year with peaches a drug on the market, rotting in New York by car-loads, not fetching enough to pay for the picking and shipping.

"But I'm makin' her comfortable," the Deacon concluded, in his tone that touch of depreciation with which great souls confess to generous deeds. "I'm tradin' her a nice little place, givin' her a clear title and five hundred dollars just for her equity in her property."

The confession was received by Lester with a sort of impersonal admiration. "Very generous, I should say," he commented. "And when I think of what you are doing for me——"

"I'm doing that for Elsie," the other hastened to disclaim. "She's took to you."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes, she's took to you," the Deacon repeated emphatically. "An' I'd like you for a son-in-law. You come from a fine family—the kind I want my daughter to marry into."

"Thank you, sir," Lester said fervently.

They dismounted at the little station, toward

which the seven-forty train was rushing without enthusiasm, to leave without regret.

"Too bad you couldn't stay over night," the Deacon said.

"I'd like to, but I've got some business at Belmont Park in the morning."

Tillinger nearly backed off the platform in his horror. "Horse racin'!" he cried.

Lester laughed. "Well, the governor starts Firefly to-morrow, in the big stake race," he explained.

"I don't believe in horse racin'," declared Deacon Tillinger, his facial expression lending confirmation to his words.

But Lester replied easily, "Oh, I was raised on it—it's in the blood. And Firefly's the best colt dad ever had in his stables."

"Now, don't go riskin' your money that way, Mr. Morgan," his future father-in-law admonished. "'Tain't right if you want to go to work."

"No, sir, I won't, but I've got to go to New York to-night. I'll be back to-morrow noon, ready to begin work whenever you say."

The train was at the station, snorting its contempt for its surroundings, and clasping his

benefactor's hand gratefully, Lester leaped aboard and was borne away.

And the Deacon returned to his buggy and urged his somnolent steed toward Sister Bascom's, to see what fate had in store for a philanthropist whose only desire was to make a helpless woman comfortable.

CHAPTER X

AFTER Joe left his mother's kitchen on his errand of diplomacy, Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Gilbert sat dejectedly for a moment and considered ways and means. Muggs broke the silence.

"We got to help the kid out some way, Gilly," he said.

"How yer goin' to help him if he won't stand for it?" Gilly demanded gloomily.

"Dig up a roll and tell him we borrowed it."

Gilly seemed to find hope in this suggestion. "We might take a look at this guy Tillinger's joint," he replied.

But action was deferred by the entrance of Betty, in a go-to-meeting dress. It was pink muslin, flouncy, home-made; but because Betty wore it, it was charming. Muggs, who, had he seen it in New York with another wearer, would at once have denounced its owner as a "rube skirt," gazed at it entranced. Betty was not unaware of the gaze.

"Excuse me, but I saw a friend of mine comin'. Come in, Jessie," she said, as she opened the outer door.

"Hello, Betty," the newcomer exclaimed. "Elsie told me your brother was back. My, it must have been a——" and she stopped abruptly and self-consciously on seeing Muggs and Gilly.

She was fair, she was plump, she was red-haired and red-blooded, if that term may be applied to a lady. She was attired in a confection of green and white that staggered in the wake of the city fashions, and displayed her charms to advantage.

Continuing the mythical strain and assuming that Cupid was still on the job behind the jam kettle, he must have loosed another shaft at Gilly, who wriggled slightly and, with outstretched neck, devoured the visitor visually. Perhaps Cupid, the defier of coincidence, then sneaked away, satisfied with a good night's work.

"This is Miss Strong, Mr. McCarthy," Betty said primly.

"Tickled to death," responded Muggs, with courtly grace.

Jessie bowed, and perhaps Cupid's arrow

had pierced her on its way to Gilly, for her eyes were on him.

"And Mr.—Mr.—I'm awfully sorry, but I've forgotten your name," and Betty looked contritely at Gilly.

"Why, my name is——" and Gilly, who couldn't remember it himself, stopped as one on the brink of a precipice. He appealed to Muggs. "Tell her what it is, will yer?" he asked.

"Sure, I'll tell her what your name is——" began Muggs, approaching the same precipice. "Oh, tell her yourself," he added heartlessly. "You ain't afraid to tell her your name, are you?"

Gilly dropped from hope to despair, and ran his fingers around the inside of his collar, either to relieve his embarrassment or to dislodge the name.

"Oh, yes, I remember—Mr. Gilbert," Betty broke in.

"That's it—Gilbert," Gilly confirmed with relief.

Muggs turned to Betty, the light of ready untruth shining in his eyes. "You see, I just made him a bet you wouldn't remember it, so

we didn't want to tell you till you'd had a chance to think," he said.

"Mr. Gilbert—Miss Strong," Betty finished impressively.

Jessie was not one to let the joys of formality escape her. "How do you do?" she said, and Gilly bowed low.

"Friends of Joe's from New York," Betty explained.

"Indeed!" Jessie's own pretty air of importance was undiminished before the cosmopolites.

"Yes, just passing through," Gilly stated, impressed with the necessity of speech.

The gallant Muggs hastened to Betty, who had begun to clear the table. "Let me help you with them things," he said.

"Oh, no, thank you, don't trouble yourself."

"Oh, please, no trouble at all," and Muggs gaily carried a dishpan of table-ware to the sink.

"Did you and Mr. McCarthy come with Mr. Bascom?" Jessie asked.

Abashed in the atmosphere of politeness, and in the presence of beauty, Gilly hesitated. "Not exactly with him—sort of after him."

"Haven't you been here before?"

"No, ma'am, not before this."

"What do you think of our village?"

As Gilly had seen nothing of the village, his imagination skidded slightly at this conventional question. "Why——" he began.

But Muggs assisted him with polished readiness. "It's aces," he declared. "We're thinkin' of wrappin' it up and takin' it back to New York with us."

Inferring from Muggs' manner that this was meant for humour, the girls laughed politely, and Jessie's mind turned to household matters.

"Can't I help?" she asked.

"Let's me and you carry over this cup," suggested Gilly, not to be outdone by Muggs.

Then they all laughed as Jessie, rather self-consciously, and Gilly, rather sheepishly, between them carried the cup and saucer to the sink. So the housework was speedily finished, in order that both the girls might go forth to praise the Lord, and one of the men go to rob the Deacon.

"Oh, Jessie, Elsie Tillinger wants us to stop by for her," Betty chirped.

As Betty mentioned the proper noun, Muggs became alert, or rather more alert than usual.

"That's the name of the man that keeps the grocery store, ain't it?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Jessie.

Muggs received a significant look from Gilly, and said, "Me and Mr. Gilbert is thinkin' about openin' a grocery store ourselves."

"Are you?" Jessie asked.

"Oh, yes," Gilly responded truthfully.

"Tillinger's is a big store—that is, for such a little place."

"I'd like to see it some time, to see how business is around here," said Muggs.

"You could find Deacon Tillinger there now, if you want to see him; the light's still on in the store."

Gilly and Muggs followed Jessie to the window, whence she was looking out toward the village.

"Which light?" Gilly asked.

"The big one, just between those two little ones."

"It's an old store, but it's a real nice one," said Betty, with local pride.

The two men anxious for information regarding commerce, and the two girls willing to impart it, gathered near the table, in an interested group.

"What's it like inside?" questioned Gilly.

"Well," began Betty, "in the front part they've got counters on each side and down the centre. One side is all groceries and the other side is drygoods, and in the middle is——"

"Barrels of flour, molasses and potatoes," guessed Muggs.

Betty laughed with amused scorn at such ignorance. "Oh, no. They keep all the barrels in the cellar," she said.

"How do they get 'em there?" asked Gilly.

"Why, they let them down the cellar steps."

"Oh, they got cellar steps," exclaimed Muggs, lost in admiration of such enterprise. "Don't they interfere with the windows?"

The absurdity of this appealed to Betty, who answered, "Why, the cellar steps ain't in front of the store; they're around the back way, under the office."

"Oh, I see," responded Muggs. "The office is in the back of the store." He turned to Gilly and spoke with an emphasis intended to impress him. "I'm always tellin' you the back of the store is the place for an office," he said.

"Well, you don't get such a good light there," argued Gilly, apparently unconvinced.

"There's plenty of light in Deacon Tillinger's office," declared Jessie. "There's a big window right by the desk."

"By his desk?" Gilly asked earnestly.

"No, by the bookkeeper's desk. The Deacon's desk is over in the other corner near the safe."

At the word safe the series of mental pictures that had been forming in Mr. Gilbert's mind was completed, though he did not lose interest in the conversation. Muggs turned to him, and spoke in unqualified approval of the arrangement of Tillinger's place of business. "Of course, that's the place for the desk —right by the safe," he said, and added genially, "I like old stores, and old desks, and old safes."

Betty, who had gone to the window, now called: "Look! They've closed up; the light's gone out." She seemed disappointed that the partners' visit to the store must be delayed.

But Muggs did not share her disappointment. "Ain't it time you was gettin' your exercise, Mr. Gilbert?" he asked solicitously.

"Sure," Gilly returned. "I think I'll go out and take a little walk."

"Mr. Gilbert's doctor always makes him take

a walk after eatin'," Muggs explained, as his well-informed friend secured his hat.

"Good night, Mr. Gilbert," said Jessie, with an interest properly veiled by formality.

"Good night," Gilly responded.

"You're comin' back, ain't you?" asked Betty.

"Oh, yes. It won't take me long," Gilly replied reassuringly, as he went out.

When Gilly left the porch he adopted a more professional manner, crept to the wall, and, skirting its inner side, moved toward the village, his eyes occasionally seeking the road. But as he found it deserted he walked with more confidence.

A small body bumped against him and he leaped aside in alarm. It was Ezra, who, having paused in his walk with Joe to excavate a mole from Mis' Johnson's pet flower bed, had missed Joe and returned home to sleep off the fatigue of his labours. Gilly's exit from the house had awakened Ezra, and enchanted by Gilly's slinking demeanour, he had followed him, and was gleeful in his greetings. A dog seemed an incongruous companion for a safe-robbing expedition, and Gilly tried to "shoo" the animal home, without effect.

The beauty of the night was lost on Gilly. Single of purpose his mind was absorbed in his work, though touched with contempt for the task to which he was to apply his talents. Seeing no one, he leaped the wall at the confines of the Bascom farm and took to the road, but kept in the shadow of the trees.

He paused before a large, two-story frame structure and viewed it with interest. It was an abandoned bakery, that looked very desolate in the moonlight, and its boarded windows and weed-grown grounds indicated to Gilly that it was not his destination. So he went on, not knowing that Fate was to entangle his future inextricably with that of the lonely building.

The inmates of the few houses he passed were preparing for worship, and did not dream that such a celebrity was near. That Dynamite Gilly, the mention of whose name softened with admiration the harsh voices of the underworld, was striding by.

Tillinger's store was dark. Gilly moved around to the rear, still accompanied by Ezra, who could not be made to realise that he was *de trop*. Regretfully Gilly essayed to kick Ezra, who pranced about him joyously, regarding the demonstration as one of playfulness.

Gilly then looked at Ezra speculatively, reflecting that if he did not bark all might be well, as Ezra's complexion would blend unobtrusively with the shades of night.

Gilly ascended the slanting cellar doors and reached a window. He slipped his knife between the middle sashes, pushed back the window catch, raised the lower sash, and climbed into the dark office. His groping hands encountered a desk—the bookkeeper's. Moving cautiously along the wall, he closed the door leading to the store, then returned and lowered the window and its shade.

Not till then did he strike a match and go to the safe. He kneeled beside it, and placed his ear lovingly against it, near the combination knob, which he manipulated with lingering, tender care. And outside, by the cellar door, Ezra sat, and again gave his attention unreservedly to the moon.

CHAPTER XI

JOE BASCOM sat on a boulder on his Hill of Lost Hopes and viewed the beauty of the night. There was a spirit of peace in the air. The verdure-cooled breeze seemed to breathe it; it sat high on the farthest mist-clad hill, and some of it—possibly borne by the breeze—entered Joe's troubled soul.

Across the way the forgotten beacon lamp still shone in his mother's window, and he smiled, rose and walked toward it, kicking his way through the thick growth of the hollows. For his coming interview with the Deacon he would borrow a little of the spirit of belief which his mother possessed in such fulness. Perhaps there was a spot of goodness somewhere in Tillinger's hard nature. Anyway, Joe would not approach him in a spirit of antagonism, and above all, he would not lose his temper.

Reaching his home, he paused a moment at the well before going in to join the others. It would be too late now to see the Deacon be-

fore meeting. It might be that Joe, Betty and his mother would start for the next meeting from the little house near the pond. Well, he reflected, there was no sense in mooning about any longer. He would do his best, and if the crash came, try to hold up his head afterwards.

When Joe entered the kitchen it was empty. He opened the woodshed door, but no one was there, and he was about to try other parts of the house when the sound of a buggy stopping nearby drew him to the window. The Deacon was coming to close the deal for the farm. Joe stood for a moment, his hands deep in his pockets, bracing himself for the coming interview, and renewing his vows of self-control.

The Deacon entered with his usual briskness. In his hand was a large envelope, evidently containing the papers Sister Bascom was to sign. His momentum carried him well into the room before he saw Joe. Then he stopped, the shock of surprise making him rigid, expressionless. Joe looked at him with a pleasant smile, watching his features take on a look of disdain.

"You're back, are you?" he said, low and snarlingly.

"Sit down, Mr. Tillinger," Joe replied politely.

"I'm here to see your mother," snapped the Deacon, still motionless.

"But I'd like to talk to you first, please."

"There ain't nothin' I want to say to you."

Chilled but not disheartened by this inauspicious opening, Joe returned to the attack. "I suppose not, but I know what you've come for, and my mother wants me to attend to it for her," he said.

"Oh," grunted the Deacon, poised, ready for any hazard, and ignorant of the effort Joe's next speech cost him.

"She's told me all about how good you've been to her."

"She has, eh?" The Deacon's tone was softer. He seemed to be placated, almost philanthropic.

"Oh, yes. I was just over to see you, but you got here first. Won't you sit down, Mr. Tillinger?"

Eying Joe appraisingly, the Deacon sat down. He was more at his ease, for evidently Joe had no point of vantage, else why should he be so civil. "Then you understand our agreement, do you?" he asked.

"Well," Joe replied, very suavely, "I'd like to hear it from you, to make sure I got it straight."

"This farm is too much for your mother," Tillinger began, with an air of judicial kindness. "Needs a lot of tending to and money to keep it up, an' she's gettin' further an' further behind right along. I've worried about her quite a bit." He spoke with such whining hypocrisy that Joe was almost inclined to laugh, an inclination that changed with the utterance of Tillinger's next words. "Now, she can manage first rate in a small place—what with doing odd jobs around, an' finding a place for Betty to work—an' perhaps you helpin' out again like you used to."

"I see," Joe contrived to put in smilingly.

"Well, I'm givin' your maw the Jones place and five hundred dollars for equity, that's the agreement." The Deacon's tone of benevolence flowed smoothly now. He drew from the envelope the tokens of his kindness, one at a time, describing them to Joe as he did so. "Here's a receipt, to date, for your maw's bill. Here's my check to make up the five hundred, and here's a deed to the Jones property, all

free and clear, and this is the deed for your maw to sign."

He handed the last paper to Joe, and put the others back in their envelope, with the exception of the receipted bill, which he left on the table. Joe did not read the deed, but reflected with rage on its true conditions. Twenty acres of good farm land which, despite its encumbering mortgage, was worth at least fifteen thousand dollars, in exchange for a shack in what was almost a swamp. A shack that Tillinger probably had bought in at a tax sale, and for which the most sanguine buyer would not pay five hundred dollars. So this was the way the Deacon was doing it.

When Joe spoke again it was frankly, as though mentioning a contingency that might not have occurred to the Deacon. "Mr. Tillinger," he said, "we'd rather hold on to this place a while longer."

"What?" the Deacon exploded, and grabbed the deed from the smiling Joe. "It's too late for that now," he cried.

"Why is it too late?" Joe insisted pleasantly.

"Because the bargain's all been made and agreed to, and only this afternoon I arranged to turn the place over to—to a party from New

York," the Deacon answered, rapidly and venomously.

Joe struggled for composure. "But how could you do that? My mother hasn't signed anything yet, has she?" he asked.

"Oh, so that's it! You think you can hold me up?" At last Tillinger had fathomed Joe's motives.

"Not at all; I——"

"Well, you'll find you can't. The terms has all been settled, and your mother's took one hundred and twenty-five dollars to bind the bargain."

"What?" Joe was puzzled for a moment. "Oh, you mean your bill?"

"Yes, I charged it off and here's the receipt."

"Suppose I pay it?"

His own sleeve full of tricks, the Deacon usually suspected the other fellow of concealing one, and he eyed Joe steadily. "Can yer pay it?" he demanded.

"I say suppose——" Joe temporised.

"No supposin' about it. I say, can yer? I know yer can't. Then there's the taxes and the interest; over six hundred dollars."

"We got the peach crop."

"You try to sell it," the Deacon said scornfully. "Peaches ain't worth counterfeit money this year."

The good spot in the Deacon seemed pretty hard to find; the effort required more repression than had Joe's whole year in prison. But he now spoke appealingly from the last ditch of his self-control, as it were. "But listen, Mr. Tillinger. You made this bargain to do my mother a favour, because she and Betty was alone here—I'm back now, and I want to stay and look out for them and try my hand at runnin' the place."

"You run the place?" Tillinger cried contemptuously. "I know you. You can't run nothin', and your maw'd be a good sight better off without you than with you."

"Perhaps that ain't a bad guess, but all the same I'm goin' to try it."

Nothing could have enraged Tillinger more than Joe's tone of quiet determination. He almost screamed as he answered: "No, you ain't. The farm's mine, and I don't want to multiply words with you!"

The limit of endurance had been reached and passed, and Joe approached until his face was near the Deacon's, which was contorted with

rage, cupidity, contempt and a few other assorted emotions that are said to shorten life.

"Well, get this," and Joe ground his words out on a low speed that gradually changed to his highest. "You're a dirty crook, and you're trying to rob my mother. But you ain't never goin' to get away with it—I'll see you in hell first!"

"You young ——," yelled Tillinger, when the door opened, and Muggs appeared on the threshold.

Joe's emotional thunderstorm had had the not unusual effect of clearing his mental atmosphere—clearing and inspiring it. "Come in, Mr. McCarthy," he said politely, and as Muggs strolled nonchalantly in, Joe found words for his inspiration. "Did you manage to see the peaches in the moonlight?" he asked.

Muggs reeled slightly at the impact, but came back gallantly. "Sure," he answered easily.

"Did you ever see anything like 'em?"

Muggs vainly studied the belligerents and shot an arrow into the dark. "They're aces, kid, they're aces," he averred.

"Well, my offer goes," said Joe, in the tone of one who would keep his promised word, despite sacrifice. "You can have the whole crop

on the trees, just as they are now, for eight hundred dollars."

"Eight hundred?" Muggs swallowed the proposal, and allowed a discreet moment for consideration. "You're on," he decided.

"Can you give me a check in the morning?" Joe asked, polite but business-like.

This required no consideration from Muggs, as no particular time would be easier—or harder—than another. "Sure. Give it to you any time," he responded carelessly.

The Deacon, who had been attending to the words of the traders with an expression varying from disgust to contempt, turned to Joe.

"If you're saying this for me, I'll tell you it don't fool me at all," he declared. "I made this bargain fair and square, an' this receipt binds it, and if you think you can fight me, you'll find your answer in court."

As the Deacon spoke Gilly entered, with the light of success shining in his eyes, as they met the questioning look of Muggs. To make assurance doubly sure he secretly but ostentatiously displayed some bills in his expert fist. Muggs briefly motioned Gilly toward Joe, who was facing the irate Deacon, and Gilly moved genially to his friend.

"How are you, Mr. Bascom? Glad to see you again," he said, grasping Joe's hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Gilbert? Your partner has just seen the orchard; he——" and Joe stopped suddenly and turned away from the Deacon, for that had passed from Gilly's hand to his which filled him with astonishment and hope. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Gilbert?" he asked.

"Sure." Gilly sat and looked amiably up at the Deacon, who glanced at this new accession to the business world with disfavour and suspicion. Gilly sustained the ordeal, and the Deacon's vocabulary evidently failed him with his patience.

"Ugh!" he grunted, and started for the door.

"Wait a minute!" cried Joe, who had filled in the interval by counting the money Gilly had given him, and thrusting it into his pocket. "I want these gentlemen for witnesses. This man," Joe indicated the Deacon, "is tryin' to rob my mother of her farm, an' he is goin' to try a flim-flam about some money she owes him to do it." Joe took the receipted bill which Tillinger had unwittingly left on the table. "He has just presented this bill, and I want you fellows to be able to testify that I offered to pay it." Joe

drew the roll of bills from his pocket, and, a trifle over-elaborately, counted out two fifties, a twenty and a five, which he slammed on the table, picking up the receipt. He glared at Tillinger. "I've got the receipt, and there's your money," he declared.

The Deacon stared at the bills. They did not restore his vocabulary, but as currency always affected his subconscious mind, that faculty probably appraised him that if he did not take the money now he might never get it. He picked up the bills, counted them, with an expression of the greatest distrust, shoved them into his vest pocket, and, under the stern regard of the three resourceful business men, backed toward the door.

This action seemed to excite all that was primal or savage in Muggs, and he approached the Deacon threateningly. "Now, you blow! See!" he said determinedly.

"What's that?" demanded the Deacon.

"Blow! Get out o' here, or I'll bust you in the snoot!"

"Don't talk to me like that; I'll have the law on you!" the Deacon spluttered.

"Mr. Gilbert, will you kindly open the door?" Muggs asked urbanely.

Mr. Gilbert complied with the request, Muggs seized the astounded Deacon, there was the sound of explosive speech in New York and rural dialects, followed by a soft thud as the Deacon's person was hurled from the kitchen porch and reached the sod below.

Joe turned excitedly to Gilly. "Where did you get that roll? Where did you dig it up?" he cried.

"That guy's got his own money. I copped it out of the safe," answered Gilly.

"Good Lord! How much did you take?"

"There was a big roll there, but I only took a hundred and twenty-five."

Joe sank dejectedly on a chair as Muggs re-entered, followed by the adoring Ezra, who had readily transferred his affections to this latest ruffian.

"Oh, Lord!" Joe lamented. "They'll find it out in the morning."

"No, they won't," replied Muggs. "After church Gilly can put it back just as easy as he took it."

"What?" Joe exclaimed.

"What do you suppose I rough-housed him for?" asked Muggs. "Here's your dough,

kid," and he handed the roll of inconstant currency back to his friend.

The Deacon drove away into the night with approximately wild speed. Mrs. Bascom returned from her errand of mercy, and as she entered the kitchen Joe took the receipt from the table. She saw the receipt, realised that her difficulties were over, and her smile of loving confidence heightened Joe's feeling of guilt.

Betty and Jessie dropped in to join the city visitors, and they paired off as their inclinations suggested to go to meeting, Muggs sprightly and chatty with Betty, Gilly abashed but absorbed with Jessie, Mrs. Bascom taking her son's arm.

At the opening in the wall Elsie Tillinger waited shyly for them to join her. And guiding them, and sweetly vibrating the fragrant air, came the distant clang of church bells summoning the peaceful villagers to worship.

CHAPTER XII

THERE were two reasons for a light's burning after ten P. M. in the village—"folks was sick," or "comp'ny." The latter accounted for the illumination of Uncle George's room, in which Muggs and Gilly discussed the events of the evening.

Muggs, who was seated on the edge of the wide bed in which Uncle George had died, was attired in an ample night-dress whose white folds draped his slim figure in classic lines. Gilly was fully clothed, and occupied a chair, but a gown similar to Muggs' was awaiting him, lying invitingly on the bed.

They had acquitted themselves creditably at the meeting, by furtively watching the actions of the other worshippers and imitating them. They, with Joe, alone knew why Deacon Tillinger had appeared distrait during the services. Why, when he reached in his vest pocket for his usual contributary dime, he had suddenly expressed great consternation, had felt in his other pockets and then hurriedly and ab-

stractedly left the chapel, to the surprise of the congregation.

This, and various other topics they discussed, from femininity to peaches. They even touched lightly on an old steel engraving of Washington Irving, which hung on a wall of the room, Muggs declaring that Uncle George had been a pleasant-looking guy, but old-fashioned in his dress.

The time seemed ripe for Gilly's appointed task. He climbed from the window, which fortunately was on the ground floor, and once more made his way to Tillinger's store. There he repeated his loving and expert ministrations to the safe, restoring the fickle one hundred and twenty-five dollars to its lair.

Then Gilly returned to Uncle George's room, donned the waiting nightgown, and the two white-robed figures—possibly instilled with some of the spirit of peace of the little mistress of the house—sank tranquilly to sleep.

Elsie Tillinger reached home and a great determination at the same time. She would follow the dictates of her heart, not the social aspirations of the Deacon. Love in this case was the pleasant ally of Duty. It plainly was

Elsie's duty to aid Joe in the rehabilitation which had begun so auspiciously with the payment of her father's bill, of which she had heard.

While Elsie did not fear the Deacon as others did, it was no pleasant task to inform him that he was not to be the father-in-law of a social lion. Not that he was a social climber; he was arranging the marriage with Lester solely for Elsie's benefit. For the soft spot in the Deacon's nature, which Joe had sought in vain, was his love for his motherless girl.

Still, it was not pleasant to oppose him, and Elsie decided to do so before the high tide of her resolution started to ebb. But the Deacon was not in the house. Finally she located him in the stable, of which he seemed to be making a thorough search, with the aid of a lantern. A stable is no place in which to declare one's love, so Elsie waited until he came to the house, which he finally did, after scrutinising every inch of the path on his way.

"Father," Elsie began chokingly, as he entered the living-room, "I've something very important to say to you."

The Deacon responded by dropping to his

knees and examining the floor under the centre table.

When he was upright again Elsie faced him determinedly. "Father, I——" she began, but he turned from her and coursed round the room, looking intently at the floor.

"What are you doing?" Elsie asked, a trifle impatiently.

"I've lost some money," her father replied. He was not inclined to tell her the amount of his loss until it proved irretrievable.

This statement seemed trifling to a mind filled with thoughts of love. The Deacon had once searched six months for a quarter he had dropped. Elsie returned to the attack.

"Never mind it now," she said. "Father, I do not want to marry Lester Morgan."

For a moment the Deacon was jarred from thoughts of money. "Why?" he demanded. "He's a fine feller."

"Yes, but——" and Elsie's head drooped.

" 'Tain't that Joe Bascom?" her father asked sharply.

Elsie's head drooped lower, so low that the Deacon's eyes were over it, and his mind turned from an image of Joe to that of a receipted bill, then to a roll of money. His daughter's

welfare was precious to him, but of the future. The money was of the present. He picked up the lantern and went out, moving toward the road, carefully examining the path that led to it.

Elsie watched him disappear, a wry little smile on her face. It was rather humiliating to have the loss of a half-dollar or so take precedence over her happiness, but she could make allowances for him, and, after all, she had broken the ice. So thoughts of her father, and of his lost money, need not keep her awake.

Under the eaves of the Bascom farm-house, in his old room, the familiar outlines of which were now shrouded in darkness, Joe tossed on his bed, rended by many anxieties. Had he known of Elsie's interview with her father, he would have been spared one of them. The solution of the others lay in the peach crop. If only he could sell it! The rest of the household slumbered; his gentle mother, his pretty sister, the two white-robed conspirators and the amiably-disposed Ezra.

At last, desperate for sleep, Joe hit on the whimsical plan of counting the peaches individually. Summoning a vision of the orchard, he proceeded to enumerate each peach that his

mind could visualise, in its leafy surroundings. This process proved effective, being reinforced by the fatigue of the day, and presently Joe was lost in slumber, like all the villagers.

All except the Deacon, who, lantern in hand, zigzagged down the road, like an enormous, low-flying firefly, searching for the one hundred and twenty-five dollars.

CHAPTER XIII

ANXIETY proved better than an alarm-clock for Joe, for when he awoke the darkness was shaded only by a faint, slaty greyness in the east. But a robin chirped throatily from the great oak that overhung the stone wall, a sparrow peeped a sleepy protest, and Joe knew that morning was on the way.

He awoke, as he had fallen asleep, with peaches on the brain, but with a solution of the problem they presented. The Deacon may have had an object in saying they were not marketable. Joe would try to sell them himself.

As he dressed he thought of Muggs' check, which was to be forthcoming that morning, and smiled. Furthermore, he thought, the thing must be done secretly, to cover the sham of Muggs' purchase. Joe hurried out into the air, whose cool stillness was taking on a fuller tinge of grey, and to the home of the invalided Mrs. Tuttle, where he negotiated the loan of her horse and wagon, with which to go on an

errand. Into the wagon he loaded some baskets of peaches, and as a later thought went quietly to his mother's closet and possessed himself of some jars of the jam.

The household seemed undisturbed as Joe mounted the wagon and set forth, alone and breakfastless, munching a peach. Alone, except for Ezra, who had been wakened, and followed gleefully, possibly under the impression that Joe was stealing the horse and wagon.

Joe went unobserved save by one white-robed figure. Disturbed either by the creaking of the wagon or of his conscience, Muggs rose and regarded his friend wonderingly, from a window. "Gee," he murmured. "It didn't take him long to get back that rube habit of gettin' up in the night." A wren in the oak, rousing fussily to household cares, glared suspiciously at Muggs, and he crept sleepily back to bed.

The eastern grey gave way to opal, then to pink, and the usual miracle of dawn followed. Betty and her mother were busy with their tasks when Deacon Tillinger approached, on his way to the seven o'clock train. Mrs. Bascom, fresh and sweet as the new day, greeted him from the porch, while Betty hovered in the shade of the kitchen.

During a sleepless night the Deacon's mind had been possessed by many ideas, plans and suspicions. He had confided enough of the suspicions to Elsie to disturb her peace, and now wondered how far he should go in planting unrest in the gentle bosom of Joe's mother. There was something about her that forestalled direct brutality.

"Do you approve of your boy's tryin' to get this place away from me, Sister Bascom?" he said, after they had exchanged greetings.

"I thought his payin' your bill had——" she began, flutteringly, but the Deacon broke in:

"The place is cert'nly morally mine."

"Of course, I gave you my word it was, Deacon," Mrs. Bascom said bravely.

Tillinger considered. By now he and every one in the village knew that Joe had gone on some mysterious errand. There was a chance that the transaction of the night before was bona fide, so it would be desirable for the Deacon to have a line of retreat open. "I don't want to take the farm, Sister Bascom," he said. "I was only doin' it to help you out. An' now I'm in an awkward fix, for I've already sold the place to a man in New York."

"Well, Deacon, as I've agreed to sell it to you——"

"No, I want to treat you as fair as I can," he interrupted. "This man's comin' here to-day, and when he does, I'm going to ask him *not* to take the place."

To Mrs. Bascom's mind, distorted by goodness, nothing could seem fairer than this arrangement by which the Deacon could take advantage of whichever way the financial cat jumped. She glowed with appreciation. In fact, she seemed a bit too happy.

"Of course, your son may be actin' in good faith," Tillinger continued dubiously, "but them two New York business friends of his—I distrust 'em; 'specially the gabby one that says he bought the peaches."

"*Says* he bought 'em!" she cried.

"Yes. And the money for your bill is gone. Now, mind you, I'm not sayin' anything, but——"

Mrs. Bascom's mind was incapable of harboring the dark suspicion launched by the Deacon's words. "You must have lost the money," she said, greatly distressed.

"I've hunted everywhere for it," he replied. "Now I'm goin' to Peekskill, and I'll look them

two fellers up in 'Bradstreet's,' and I hope, Sister Bascom, I *hope* to find 'em all right." And so, having done his best to spoil the glory of the morning for the little lady, the Deacon continued on his way to the seven o'clock train.

She watched him lope away, and fifteen seconds may have elapsed before optimism again took charge of her mind and peace of her countenance, and she entered the kitchen. Betty had overhead the interview and her expression was not peaceful; mutinous would have been a better word for it.

"Maw, I'm glad Deacon Tillinger lost the money!" she declared. Mrs. Bascom was speechless with horror. "I don't care, I am," Betty continued. "I hate him, maw, I just hate him!"

"Betty!" cried her shocked parent.

"He was too mean for anythin'. The idea of sayin' this place was his."

"But it is, Betty; I agreed to sell it to him."

"Why, maw, Joe told us last night it was all right as long as you hadn't signed any papers."

"I gave the Deacon my word, Betty," and Mrs. Bascom sought excuses for Tillinger's conduct while her daughter tempestuously continued with the housework.

Muggs and Gilly were now stirring, having branded themselves as sluggards by sleeping until half-past six. Even then they were moved to rise only by sounds that came from other parts of the house. Both were pensive. Gilly surveyed the room, into which the morning sunlight poured, and which shared the sweet immaculateness of all of Mrs. Bascom's surroundings.

"Gee, this place is so clean it hurts my lamps," he said. "But it's kind of a nice hurt," he admitted on consideration.

"Sort of hard to think of livin' up to it, though, if a guy could," Muggs replied, doubtfully. "But we got to blow. I seen Joe beatin' it early this mornin' with a load of peaches, prob'bly to try to sell 'em, and when he comes back we mustn't be here to cramp his style."

"Do we beat it before breakfast?" Gilly asked anxiously.

"No, that'd be castin' reflections on the chuck," decided Muggs. "Where's my clothes?" he cried suddenly.

The clothes were gone, and all Muggs' search revealed was two old overcoats, hanging over a chair. But his cry had evidently reached Mrs. Bascom, who tapped discreetly

on the door. "I've got your clothes," she said. "I thought you boys might want to go into the swimmin'-hole before breakfast. No one'll see you, and I'll have your things for you when you come back."

Muggs and Gilly looked at each other and giggled, at thought of this adventure. "Where's it at, Mrs. Bascom?" Muggs asked politely.

"Just across the road and down the holler. You can put on them two overcoats of Uncle George's." Muggs and Gilly started slightly at mention of the deceased, but donned his raiment and went forth to the adventure. As they passed unseen through the yard they saw their own garments flapping airily from a clothes line.

"There's our scenery," Gilly said in awe-struck tones. "Think of that old lady takin' it out to clean it."

"Even a guy's thoughts get clean around here," answered Muggs, which was as near as he came to accounting for his present state of mind.

Across the road the little creek paused in its babbling journey to the mighty Hudson, at a natural basin overhung and sheltered by drooping willows. The two denizens of New York's tenderloin stood at the sloping, sandy edge of

the pool, dug their bare toes into the sand of the shelving bank and giggled again. Then throwing off all restraint and Uncle George's overcoats, they plunged into the cool, green water and gave themselves up to the forgotten joys of splashing, wallowing, yelling, and splattering each other.

The pool was neither wide nor deep, but it held some essence that magically brought back one's boyhood. That of Muggs, spent in his birthplace, Brooklyn, from whence he had wandered across the bridge to mingle with the underworld, and attain his present skill and envied reputation. That of Gilly, who, as a youth, had come from the Middle West, to join the submerged brotherhood of New York, take on its dialect and manners, and earn its respect by his prowess.

And when they returned to the house, fairly shining with exultation, their clothes were lying in cleanliness and order on the freshly made bed. Muggs' suit had travelled in the paths of sin for at least two years, Gilly's for a while longer, but now they seemed to have acquired a touch of respectability. Their owners were vaguely conscious of this. Muggs looked complacently at his brilliant garments.

"Mebbe this suit will get so it won't be ashamed of itself in church," he predicted.

After breakfast the boys went out to the orchard, ostensibly to view the peaches, really to invent a lie that would satisfactorily account for two New York business men's leaving for home on foot. Muggs had an idea that untruth would come more readily in the open than in Mrs. Bascom's kitchen.

Up over the reaches of the hill in ordered lines stretched Uncle George's army of peach trees. Five acres of them, well-disciplined, and, as though at their dead and gone commander's order, weighted with burdens of rosy fruit.

"Great, ain't they?" asked Muggs. "And before this I used to think peaches grew on bushes."

"Sure, they're great, but what are they good for if you can't sell 'em. We got to think about beatin' it," Gilly replied gloomily.

A small figure slid down from one of the trees and appeared before the surprised partners. An alert, shock-headed figure, clad in overalls, after the manner of the local peasantry, and with his shirt front bulging with peaches.

"Hey, who are you?" Muggs demanded.

"Lem Tuttle, and Mis' Bascom said I could have some peaches, and my ma's sicker'n anybody 'round here," the person said rather proudly.

"Some pocket edition of a rube," commented Muggs, not without admiration.

"You're that New York man visitin' Joe?" Lem Tuttle asked.

"Yes."

"Huh!" There was a touch of scorn in the interjection. Lem Tuttle bit into a peach, and Muggs looked at him sharply.

"Why the 'huh' stuff, kid?" he asked.

The youth stared uncomprehendingly. "You the man that says he bought the peach crop?" he demanded.

"Nix on the 'says' stuff," Muggs replied, slightly discomfited.

Despite the strange words that flowed from Muggs, some of his meaning seemed to filter to the rural mind. "They ain't nobody around here believes you bought 'em. Deacon Tillinger allows it was a bluff. Still some folks is awful chumps," the youth admitted broadly.

This matter came as an unpleasant surprise to Mr. McCarthy, who gazed at his informant speculatively. The gaze was returned with the

round-eyed candour of childhood. Muggs' mind, which received stimulus from emergency, worked rapidly. It would not do to have such loose generalisations circulating in the village, at least not until Joe had had a chance to see whether there really was a market for the peach crop. Muggs drew Gilly aside.

"We got to make good here, till Joe comes back," he said. "We must pick them peaches."

"What, just us?" Gilly asked.

"No, I got a scheme," and as if moved by an after-thought Muggs returned to the visitor, who had not lost his steady-eyed interest in the strangers. "How'd you like a lot of peaches to eat with cream, an' in short-cake and them ways?" he enquired.

"Fine," Lem answered promptly.

"Every boy that picks five baskets of peaches for me to-day is going to get a full basket of 'em for himself," Muggs announced, "and that's worth nearly a dollar, if he don't want to eat 'em. And if you don't think they're mine, go ask Mis' Bascom."

Lem Tuttle gazed at Muggs, then at the trees, then at the road along which another small, overall-clad figure was walking, and rushed toward the wall. "Hey, Skinny!" he

shrilled. "This man——" and his dialect was lost in the distance. The plan was a success.

Muggs and Gilly strolled back toward the house. "Them kids will work their heads off," Muggs predicted, "and it'll put the kibosh on gossip for to-day, and mebbe Joe can sell the peaches." So chatting hopefully with the admiring Gilly he went to give Mrs. Bascom a discreetly expurgated account of the progress of their business affairs.

Later that morning Betty Bascom walked along the road that led to her home. Her slim figure was bent, her pretty face wrinkled to an expression of anxiety, her eyes fixed intently on the road. As she reached home her mother came from the kitchen door, her attitude similar to Betty's, and looked carefully around the cellar steps and the yard.

"You ain't found it, have you, maw?" asked Betty.

"No, not a sign of it."

"Well, I've looked all along from our porch to Deacon Tillinger's front door. Hunted up one side of the road goin' over, and the other side comin' back," Betty declared.

"It ain't in the kitchen, that's certain, and that's the only room the Deacon was in," and

Mrs. Bascom continued to search. "Well, it's gone and 'tain't no use lookin' any more," and so saying Mrs. Bascom still searched, going over by the well where the Deacon could not possibly have dropped his money.

Betty came down to the well seat, with a basket from which she took some jars of jam and labels that were supposed to indicate its heavenly quality. "I can't forget how the Deacon almost accused the boys of robbing him," she said, with some asperity.

Her mother answered charitably: "He will be sorry that he talked so when he thinks it over."

"It *is* curious to have two New York business men out in our orchard, pickin' peaches." Betty's mind seemed disturbed by doubt.

"That's because Mr. Gilbert's doctor ordered him to take exercise," Mrs. Bascom explained.

"Oh, yes!" And Betty's doubt disappeared. "Mr. Gilbert had to go out an' exercise last night right after supper," she recalled. "They're workin' awful hard, now, with about all the kids in town helpin' 'em pick." Betty's face lightened with an expression not usually called up by peaches or hard work. "Don't you like Mr. McCarthy, maw?" she asked.

"They're both splendid boys," her mother answered, still searching for the money that there was no use looking for.

"But Mr. McCarthy." Betty dreamily sought words to describe Muggs' charm. "Well, he's so funny—and he's got the nicest smile. Let the Deacon Tillinger look them up. I ain't afraid," she declared confidently, and paused for moral support. "Are you?" she added, and pasted a label on a jar, upside down.

Mrs. Bascom abandoned her search and came to her daughter's aid. "Now, Betty, do stop worryin'," she said. "Just think; Joe's home, Deacon Tillinger's bill's paid, the peach crop's sold, and we're all well! Why, we ought to be so busy bein' happy—there ain't no time for anything else—except the house-work," and in pretty dismay she started toward her kitchen.

"I *am* happy, maw," Betty replied. "I'm always happy after you talk to me."

Mrs. Bascom paused for another smile—a smile mingled with gratitude, as though the mother should be thankful to the daughter for gaining inspiration from her words. She went into the kitchen, and Betty, soothed in spirit, placidly pasted labels on the jars of jam.

Miss Jessie Strong entered from the road,

with a manner of fluttering importance, and a child's wagon which she pushed before her. Although the day was Thursday Miss Strong's apparel bespoke the Sabbath. It was pink, rather elaborate for the occasion, and for a full description of it one would have to consult those fashion papers that give illustrations of the styles in vogue in the village at that time.

"Hello," she said, as she saw Betty.

"Oh, hello, Jessie."

"Company gone?"

Betty smiled at this specious question. "Oh, no, they're in the orchard," she answered.

"Everybody's wonderin' why they bought the peach crop——" Jessie began.

"Well, I guess everybody'll find out soon enough," retorted Betty. "Did you bring the wagon so that you could help them?"

"Ma sent me over to see if they'd sell her two baskets," replied Jessie, forgetting her specious question.

Muggs' voice was heard raised in song: " 'Shall we gather at the river?' " he enquired, in a pleasing, East Side tenor. " 'The lumty te-tumty te-lum te-tum te river. Shall we——' " His voice had what the Irish term a lilt. He

came down the slope from the orchard, propelling a wheelbarrow loaded with baskets of peaches. His coat was missing; his air was that of one who glories in his work. He put down the wheelbarrow, removed his hat and regarded the girls blithely.

"Good-morning," said Jessie.

"Is it morning yet?" Muggs demanded incredulously. "Seems as if I'd been up a week." He rolled his barrow near the house, preparatory to unloading it.

"Jessie wants to buy some peaches," announced Betty.

Muggs was the merchant at once. "Sure," he said, approaching Jessie briskly.

"I guess she'd rather see Mr. Gilbert about it," suggested Betty, with infinite tact.

Jessie laughed self-consciously, as though the suggestion were a joke, but she started to act on it. "He's in the orchard, ain't he?" she asked.

"Oh, he's there, all right—just fell out of a tree," said Muggs.

"Goodness!" Betty cried, and Jessie stopped suddenly.

"Landed plumb on his bean," Muggs added cheerfully.

"Was he hurt?" demanded Jessie.

"Well, he's shook up a little."

"I'll go and see how he is," said Jessie, and hurried toward the orchard.

"He ain't hurt bad, is he?" asked Betty.

"Oh, he's all right. That kind of exercise is good for him," Muggs replied airily, and began to unload his peaches, placing the baskets in the shade of the wall.

Betty laughed and regarded the contents of the baskets. "How are you getting along with the peaches?" she asked.

"Oh, fine, but there's a terrible lot of them."

"I hope you'll be able to sell 'em."

"So do I," murmured Muggs.

Betty was surprised. "But you knew you could when you bought them, didn't you?" she questioned.

"Oh, sure," replied Muggs, with conviction.

"Deacon Tillinger said no one would buy them this year." It was evident that Betty would not object to the Deacon's prediction proving false. The mention of that prophet's name had the effect of slightly subduing Muggs. He glanced sidewise at Betty.

"Have you—have you seen the Deacon this morning?" His tone expressed only sprightly interest.

"He was here a while ago. Did you want to see him?" she asked.

"Oh, no, I ain't particular about it," and Muggs blandly waved the matter aside.

Betty and her mother had refrained from mentioning the Deacon's loss to their guests, through a not unnatural delicacy for which Betty was sure there was no further need. Nevertheless, she watched Muggs keenly as she said: "He lost all the money Joe paid him last night."

Muggs was surprised and a trifle concerned. "Lost it, eh? Oh, that's too bad." Then he continued casually, as if to make conversation: "Did the Deacon see Joe?"

"No; Joe ain't come back yet."

"Oh!"

"He went before daylight," Betty further informed Muggs. "And he hired Mrs. Tuttle's wagon."

Poor Muggs, who had known few good women, was not aware that occasionally they are inquisitorial. However, the tenor of his life usually kept him on his guard. "Yes?" he said.

"Do you know why?" asked Betty.

"Perhaps he went for his trunk," countered Muggs, who hated to lie to Betty.

"Perhaps. He didn't bring a thing with him," replied Betty, surprised at her brother's negligence.

"We didn't, either. Those—you know—those things we found on the bed last night—gee, they were immense!"

"They were two of Uncle George's night gowns," Betty said calmly.

Muggs suppressed a shudder, unloaded the last of his peaches, picked up the handle of his wheelbarrow, and broke into song and movement. "'Shall we gather at the river?'" he carolled.

"We sang that at meetin' last night," Betty reminded him.

"Yes." Muggs stopped near her. "It's a new one on me," he confessed. "I know 'The Suwanee River,' and 'On the Banks of the Wabash.' I like river songs." He sat in the wheelbarrow and looked earnestly at the young girl. Everything about her and her surroundings was so sweet and pure. And Muggs, pleasantly flushed with exercise, his dark, curly hair hanging over his animated face, seemed to take on a reflected wholesomeness. "Your

mother knows all them prayers and songs by heart, don't she?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Betty answered, with gentle impressiveness. "They mean everything to her."

"You don't say," Muggs said admiringly.

"Yes, she says it makes her believe."

"Makes her believe?" Muggs was perplexed.

"Believe everythin' is goin' to be all right, and then it is."

Muggs was affected to the point of wonderment. "What do you think of that?" he questioned.

"Why, all the time Joe was away, somehow she just knew he was comin' back, even when everybody else thought he was dead," continued Betty. "And last night he walked in just when she was prayin' for him to come."

"No," Muggs breathed.

"Honest!"

Muggs was awed, as though in the presence of the miraculous. He sought for some analogy to this phenomenon but found none. "That's some system if it works," he murmured.

"It always does with her," Betty assured him.

"Can you believe things that way?"

"I try to, but I ain't as good at it as maw is," Betty answered, with wistful sincerity. "Have you ever tried it?"

Muggs shook his head. "I ain't never heard of it," he said simply. Hitherto his faith in anything supernatural had been pinned to a superstition—what he called a "hunch." Now, a spiritual force was made manifest to him, that worked much better than a hunch. And Betty had explained it, which enhanced its value. And she shared her mother's belief in it. It was all very wonderful and impressive. "But it sounds great the way you tell it," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. GILBERT was seated in the orchard under a tree. He was coatless and collarless, and was fulfilling the pleasant duties of a superintendent. Among the branches of the other trees were his cohorts, almost all the small boys of the village, who were vigorously picking peaches.

Miss Strong approached, from the yard, and viewed Mr. Gilbert with unveiled solicitude. "Mr. McCarthy says you had a fall," she said.

Gilly had forgotten the fall, but in the light of Jessie's sympathy it became a matter of moment. However, he treated it with fortitude, bravely discounting its effects. "It didn't amount to nothin'," he said. "I only slipped out of the lower branch of this tree. 'Twouldn't have hurt at all if I hadn't landed on my block."

"Mr. McCarthy said it was on your bean," replied Jessie, confused by the terms.

"Same thing; bean, or block," Gilly generalised.

"It must have hurt you," Jessie protested, with some anxiety. "What part of you was it that you landed on?"

Gilly turned his head, producing a pleasurable glow of pain that he located at the base of his neck. It seemed that his bean had escaped injury, but this portion of him had encountered a root of the tree, and a small lump of flesh that had risen on it had taken on a faintly brunette tint.

As she saw this Jessie's solicitude increased. "You ought to have it tended to right away," she decided, looking at the lump with concern.

At this moment young Lem Tuttle dropped out of a nearby tree, with a basket about a quarter-full of fruit, which he proceeded to pour into another basket that was on the ground and was about half-full. He then looked frankly at Jessie and Gilly; frankly and derisively. After which he placed the empty basket on his head and climbed the tree, whistling the while, "Oh, how I wish I had a girl!"

Jessie flushed, and looked about the orchard. Small heads protruded from the leaves of a number of trees, like animated fruit. Heads thatched brown, black, red and tow, whose

faces bore expressions varying from amusement to contempt.

The picture did not please Miss Strong, who flushed deeper, and said constrainedly: "I'd like to buy a couple of baskets of peaches, if you'll sell 'em."

"Sure," Gilly responded, scowling at the heads which withdrew into the leafage. "I'll pick you out nice ones," and they moved about inspecting the baskets of fruit beneath the trees, until Gilly found two that suited him. "Will these do?" he asked.

"They're fine," said Jessie. "Here's the money for them. Ma thought they'd be seventy-five cents a basket, what Deacon Tillinger always charged," and she forced a dollar and a half on Gilly, who was reluctant to take it.

Gilly tried to lift one of the baskets, the effort bringing a look of pain to his face, and Miss Strong, forgetful of the heads, again became solicitous. "Oh, you mustn't try to carry 'em!" she cried. "You'll strain yourself something awful."

"I'll lug 'em for you," Gilly insisted, but Jessie placed her hand on his shoulder and drew him up. "No, we'll get two baskets down by

the house. I won't let you strain your back on my account," she said.

Gilly regarded her with a mawkish smile. "Say, you're mighty thoughtful," he murmured.

At this moment of sentiment the orchard burst into shrill melody. Lem Tuttle began, and the other kids joined in a whistling chorus that ran: "Oh, how I wish I had a girl!"

And Gilly, truculent but repressed, and Jessie, self-conscious and rosy, marched toward the farm-house, and did not regain their ease of manner until the mocking strain was lost in the distance.

By the time Jessie and Gilly reached the Bascom back yard they had forgotten the innate cruelty of small boys and were absorbed in a discussion of Gilly's bump, Jessie suggesting precautionary measures. "If I was you I'd see a doctor about it," she advised.

"Oh, it ain't bad enough for that," Gilly demurred.

Betty and Muggs had finished their discussion of the phenomenon of her mother's faith, and its manner of working miracles. They were deeply and consciously impressed with the wonder of it. And equally deeply, but unconsciously, impressed with another wonder—the

old wonder that young Cupid had introduced anew the night before.

Gilly slowly became aware that he was in the presence of others than Jessie, and that speech fitting the occasion was required. "She bought some peaches," he announced, coming to earth with another bump. "Will two of these be all right?" he asked Jessie, pointing to the baskets his working partner had trundled from the orchard.

"Yes, splendid!" said Jessie.

Muggs had risen and was starting back to the scene of his labours with his wheelbarrow. He paused in protest. "Say, why didn't you bring two up from the orchard?" he demanded of Gilly.

But Jessie came to the relief of the invalid. "Because I wouldn't let him carry them, not with his lame back," she said indignantly.

"Why didn't you do it with your hands?" Muggs questioned Gilly.

Before Gilly could frame an answer Mrs. Bascom came out of the kitchen door with a watering-pot, and acrimony faded in the light of her presence. "Good morning, Jessie," she said.

"How de do," Jessie responded. "Mr. Gil-

bert fell out of a tree and hurt himself real bad, Mrs. Bascom," she continued. "There's a big lump right here," and she indicated a spot between Gilly's shoulder blades.

Gilly twisted his head around in a vain effort to view the spot for himself, the result being a twinge of pain that caused him to clutch at the back of his neck, as though he would grasp and remove the bump.

Mrs. Bascom dropped the watering-pot and approached Gilly. Now that some one was in trouble she was in her element. She took to good deeds as some take to golf and others to argument. "Let me see," she said.

"Oh, it ain't nothing, thank you, ma'am," Gilly depreciated.

"Why, it's quite a bruise," she declared. Gilly again tried to view the bruise, and again he winced with pain, and Mrs. Bascom hurried into the kitchen for first-aid materials.

"Will you put these on the wagon for me, Mr. McCarthy?" Jessie asked, referring to the two baskets of peaches Gilly had selected.

"Sure," Muggs answered, complying.

Gilly approached Jessie, smiling ingratiatingly. "Say, we don't want to take this money,"

he said, and extended his hand, with the dollar and a half in it.

"Oh, yes, ma wouldn't let me accept the peaches for nothing," Jessie replied, decidedly.

"Aw, take some of it back, won't you?" urged Gilly.

"No, seventy-five cents a basket is cheap enough," and Jessie started for her wagon.

But Muggs, who was a squire of dames by instinct and cultivation, interceded. "Can't I take this home for you?" he asked.

"I'll do that," Gilly interrupted, quickly.

"Oh, no, not with your lame back," Muggs retorted, and Gilly withdrew into his shell of invalidism.

"I don't need any help, thanks," Jessie said, and Muggs wheeled his barrow toward the orchard, trilling: " 'Shall we gather at the river?' "

And as he went Betty decided that she would assist her friend with the wagon. "I'm just goin' to help Jessie home with these peaches, maw," she announced to Mrs. Bascom, who had come from the house with her first-aid materials.

"All right, dear," said her mother, and Betty and Jessie dragged the wagon away.

Mrs. Bascom came down to the well seat with the restoratives for Gilly. "Now, you sit right down here, Mr. Gilbert," she ordered kindly.

Gilly approached the well, protesting as he came: "I—I don't want to make any trouble, ma'am—I'm all right——"

But Mrs. Bascom gently forced him to sit, saying, "Oh, you'll be real lame to-morrow, if this bruise ain't attended to." She dipped a cloth into a cup of hot water, and carefully and tenderly bathed Gilly's bruise. "There!" she said, with satisfaction.

"Thank you, ma'am," began Gilly, thinking the operation was over, and starting to rise, but Mrs. Bascom held him in his seat, saying cheerfully:

"Oh, I ain't started yet."

As far as Gilly's feelings and emotions went he was as one in a strange country. It was so many years since he had known such ministrations that he had forgotten they were of the earth. He watched Mrs. Bascom wonderingly, as she poured some liniment into her palm. She caught his eye and smiled reassuringly, and Gilly returned the smile sheepishly.

"This may smart a little," she warned.

"Oh, I don't care about that," Gilly replied. "It's makin' you all the trouble I don't like."

"Why, bless you, it ain't a bit of trouble," she answered.

Skilfully and thoroughly she rubbed the lotion on Gilly's hurt. His face was slightly contorted, with what might have been taken for pain, and it was pain, but a tender, thrilling pain of the spirit. Something was clutching at Gilly's heart, drawing chords from its strings; chords that brought the thrill. And all this was deep beneath Gilly's understanding, which, unlike his feelings, was near the surface.

"That ain't bad, is it?" Mrs. Bascom asked.

"No, ma'am," he murmured.

"It would be a shame for you to get hurt while you and Mr. McCarthy are doing so much for us," Mrs. Bascom said, continuing her ministrations.

"I—I wish I could do something," responded Gilly.

"Land sakes!" she expostulated gently. "Don't you call it somethin' to buy the peach crop, when we didn't think it would bring a penny? Why, Betty and me hardly knew which way to turn before Joe came home—and then to have you boys come along and buy the

peaches—— Well, as I said to Betty, it was the Lord Himself that sent you."

Gilly's eyes sought the ground. They were turned from Mrs. Bascom as he considered her speech. He registered his denial softly: "I guess He never sent us nowhere."

But she knew better, and smiled at him, in her superior knowledge. "Oh, yes, He has," she said. Again Gilly studied the matter. What was the use? She believed it, and see the way things worked out for her! How could he say that she was wrong, and he was right? How—it was too much for Gilly. "There, now, I guess you feel different," Mrs. Bascom broke in, her treatment ended.

"I feel different now than I ever did before," he said sincerely, turning to her. "I—I ain't used to havin' nobody take care of me much."

"Oh, nonsense," Mrs. Bascom disclaimed, cheerily. "If you was home your maw'd do the same thing."

"No, ma'am—I—I ain't got no—family," Gilly answered subduedly.

It was Mrs. Bascom's turn to be subdued, and she uttered a soft "Oh!" of sympathy. Then she brightened, as a consoling thought came to her, and placed her hands on Gilly's

shoulders. "Well, she's watchin' an' lovin' you, just the same as if she was here," she declared.

"Yes, ma'am," Gilly admitted wonderingly.

"There, that's for your maw," and Mrs. Bascom kissed Gilly on the forehead, leaving him more moved and less capable of expression than before, if that were possible. "Now I must see about dinner," she said, and went toward the kitchen.

Muggs came from the orchard with another barrow-load of fruit, and she turned to him.

"Mr. McCarthy, you'll look out that Mr. Gilbert don't do any lifting to-day, won't you?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said Muggs.

And with a smile at the partners she went into the kitchen.

Gilly had remained motionless during this. He had solved one part of the problem the tangle of thoughts and emotions had aroused —he knew what he must do. He turned to Muggs, almost in panic.

"What's the matter?" demanded Muggs.

"I got to get out of here, Muggs!" Gilly cried. "I can't lie to that old lady. There's

something wrong with me. I'm off my nut, I guess."

"I know what you mean; I got it, too!"

"What?" gasped Gilly.

"Say, when I woke up this mornin' I couldn't think of nothin' but wishin' I was on the level, and the more I get sore at myself for wishin', the more I wishes."

"That's me, too," announced Gilly. Then another idea struck him, like a dark, soggy avalanche. "I heard there's only one time you feel like this," he exclaimed. "I wonder if we're goin' to die!"

CHAPTER XV

EARLIER that morning Elsie Tillinger had had another interview with her father. He had been more emphatic with her than with Mrs. Bascom, with whom no one ever was emphatic. He had bitterly denounced Elsie's purpose of rejecting Lester Morgan, in favour of Joe. He had voiced the suspicion that Muggs or Gilly had taken the money he thought he had lost, and declared that if they were in the village on his return from Peekskill, he would have them arrested.

Elsie had a proper spirit, which had upheld her in her interview with the Deacon. But now that she was alone disquieting thoughts crept in. So the morning was far from glorious to her.

She left her father's house and walked slowly down the road toward the Bascom farm. And nature, though in a smiling mood, seemed sardonically to symbolise Elsie's depression. A line of poplars—sentries of the tree world—were unbending as her father's will. The sun,

filtering through the maple leaves, checkered the dusty road with flecks of light and shade, as Elsie's life was now checkered. And a willow drooped depressedly over her path, even as Elsie's spirits were depressed.

At a cross-roads she met Betty Bascom, returning after helping Jessie Strong home with her load of peaches. A confidant sometimes is as welcome as a Samaritan, and so Betty proved to Elsie. Together they strolled on, Betty experiencing that secretly tremulous joy that eighteen feels, on hearing the troubles of eighteen.

When they arrived at the Bascom place Muggs and Gilly were still deep in a discussion of their feelings. The idea of death's being a solution of the matter had not appealed to Muggs.

"We got no time to think of dying," he argued. "We got to get back to the orchard, and keep up the bluff that we're busy."

"Gee, I hope Joe can sell the peaches!" said Gilly.

"He's on the job, all right—goin' out before daylight, tryin' to——" Muggs glanced up, saw Elsie and Betty coming, and after a warning "Sh!" invented an imaginary business transaction. "Well, wire him that we can't let him

have more than a hundred baskets," he ordered Gilly. He then apparently discovered Betty, and reverted to his usual manner. "Oh, how de do?" he said, and began to unload his barrow of peaches.

"Miss Tillinger, this is Mr. McCarthy—and Mr. Gilbert," Betty announced.

The partners bowed, impressed by the presence of the dame, the skirt, whose attractions were potent enough to lure a guy from the delights of the race-track.

"How do you do?" Elsie said. It must be confessed that she was not equally impressed. There was a lingering doubt in her mind regarding the respectability of these partners. She politely suppressed it, however.

"Is Joe home yet?" Betty asked.

"Not yet," Muggs answered. "You will excuse me—we're terrible busy," and he continued to unload the peaches.

"Your buying Mrs. Bascom's peaches has given the village quite a surprise," Elsie said to Gilly, in a none too cordial tone.

"No more than it did us," Muggs broke in.

"Really?" exclaimed Elsie, the surprise she had spoken of becoming personal.

Muggs broke in again, more quickly. "We

happened to call on Joe, and find just what we'd been lookin' for. Didn't we, Dudley?" he appealed to Gilly.

"Yes, more than we was lookin' for," Gilly confessed.

"I thought it was impossible to sell peaches this year," said Elsie.

"Oh, no, ma'am—not this kind," Muggs assured her. "Now we got to get back to the orchard."

He had finished unloading his peaches, and had no desire to prolong the interview. So he and Gilly started to go.

"But, Mr. Gilbert, you ought not to go to the orchard any more to-day," Betty protested.

"Oh, I'm takin' care of him. Don't let him do anythin' but sit on the ground and count baskets," Muggs said, reassuringly, and, taking Gilly tenderly in his arms, he assisted him to the wheelbarrow. "Get in, Dudley," he invited.

Mr. Gilbert disposed of his person in the barrow, his back resting on what might be called the dash-board, his hands grasping the sides, his legs hanging nonchalantly over the handles. On his face was a smile of confidence in his partner. And so Muggs wheeled him

away from an atmosphere laden with dangerous questions.

"Was he hurt seriously?" Elsie asked, as they disappeared.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. Maw was looking after him," answered Betty.

"Is she in the house?"

"Yes."

Elsie's anxiety, which had been lulled, or diverted, by Muggs and Gilly, returned in full force, and she started toward the kitchen. "I want to ask your mother about what father said," she announced. She paused a moment at the kitchen door. "Oh, Betty, I wish we could find the money," she said distressfully, and entered the house.

Betty had no doubts about the money, or regrets, either, and the orchard appealed to her as a pleasanter spot than the kitchen, so she started for it. But she was deflected by the appearance of Joe, returning from his errand. He was on foot, having restored Mrs. Tuttle's horse and wagon to her.

In addition to a worried look Joe had several peach baskets, a smaller basket, and the company of Ezra. The baskets were empty, but Ezra seemed full of satisfaction. Joe was

surprised at seeing the number of other filled baskets standing about. He turned to Betty as she said:

"Oh, hello."

"Hello, dear," he replied. "What's all this?" and he pointed at the peaches.

"The boys are workin' in the orchard," Betty informed him.

"Oh!" said Joe, slightly bewildered, and started toward the orchard.

But to Betty Joe's return was more of an event than an incident, and first she called, "Maw, Joe's home!" then she detained him. "Oh, Joe, can I tell you a secret?" she asked excitedly.

"No time now, sis," Joe said, from the depths of his worries.

"It's about Elsie Tillinger!" Betty continued animatedly, not to be cheated of her disclosure, and Joe stopped and retraced his steps. "She's in love with you, and she told her father she'd never marry the other man. And I think it's all because you came home." Betty finished with a sort of gloating eagerness, and watched for the impression on Joe, which was immediate and satisfactory.

But he whispered, "Sh!" for Mrs. Bascom

was coming from the kitchen, a market-basket on her arm.

"Joey, where have you been all day?" she asked, solicitous as ever for his welfare.

"Doing a few errands," he answered.

"Ain't you awful tired?"

"Not a bit," he replied, with truth. He might be worried, but tired he was not; neither was Ezra, who had sat triumphantly on the wagon seat with Joe all morning. Fatigue could be left to Mrs. Tuttle's borrowed steed, now resting in its stable. "Are you going out, dear?" Joe questioned his mother.

"I want to catch the butcher's wagon. It's just time for him to be at Mis' Martin's," she said.

"Won't he come here?"

"We ain't had him in ever so long," declared Betty, a bit plaintively.

"Betty!" Mrs. Bascom cried.

"But we can have him again, now, can't we, Joe?" Betty asked, for reassurance of their new prosperity.

Joe swallowed his feelings. "You bet we can," he affirmed. "Here's some money," and he gave his mother a bill.

Mrs. Bascom examined the bill, and ex-

claimed, almost with horror, at its size, "Goodness, Joey—I don't need five dollars."

"Yes, you do. What's five dollars?" her son demanded boastfully.

But Mrs. Bascom could not belittle the amount. "We mustn't be wasteful, dear—just because we got plenty," she cautioned, as she kissed him.

Still, this atmosphere of new-found prosperity seemed to afford her a gentle glow of satisfaction, observing which her son was conversely chilled. He wondered how long it would be before the bubble would burst, releasing the chill atmosphere that he felt. All unconscious of this his mother admonished Betty that it was time she was making the beds, smiled at Elsie Tillinger, who appeared in the kitchen doorway, and started happily away.

Betty went into the house, and Elsie came slowly toward Joe. "Good morning," he said. Then, as he saw her expression of worriment, "Why, what's the matter, Elsie?"

"Joe, will you tell me what happened when father was here last night?" she asked solemnly.

Joe sparred for time. "Hasn't he told you about it?" he countered.

"I couldn't reason with him at all. Joe,—these men who are here. Do you know them well?"

"Very well," he answered earnestly. "They're my two best friends."

Elsie at once took this as a voucher for Muggs' and Gilly's respectability. "Oh, I'm so glad," she sighed. "I've been afraid they were getting you into trouble, serious trouble."

"Why?" asked Joe, the chill of a moment before returning.

"Father thinks they took the money you paid him last night."

There seemed only one way to treat this unreasonable assumption of the Deacon's—with a bluff. "I'm going to see your father, Elsie," Joe stated determinedly.

"He's gone out of town," Elsie replied. "But he said if the men were here when he came back, he'd turn them over to the sheriff."

"If there is any trouble, it won't do to have you seen here, Elsie; why, it might look——"

But Elsie interrupted him. "Joe, if I can do anything to help you—I don't care how it looks," she declared.

"Elsie!" he cried impulsively.

Betty's words had been true. Where was

Elsie's wooer now, the social paragon? The years of discouragement and failure fell from Joe. For the moment the harassing complications that enmeshed him were forgotten. Past reverses and present troubles were lost in sentiment, for why should Elsie sound her note of sacrifice if she did not care?

And Elsie was faltering softly: "Do you—do you remember the last time we were here, before you went away,—what we said to each other?"

"I'll never forget it," he replied. She smiled and turned from him. He thought that her eyes again sought the Hill of Dreams, as they had on the night before, but now he could speak. "Are you looking at our Hill?" he asked.

She nodded, and spoke gently, "Yes."

"Where I was going to build our house——" Joe broke off, and turned away. "The times I've thought of it since—and of all the plans we made——"

"So have I——" Elsie joined in, her eyes still on the Hill.

"There's no house there," Joe sighed.

But Elsie matched hope against regret.

"Perhaps there will be, some time," she murmured.

"Everything has changed, now."

"I haven't changed. I'm just the same as I was then," and as Joe turned hopefully to her she added, smiling whimsically, "even if I have got on a different dress."

"Elsie," he said impassionedly, "I care more for you than I do for my life, or my soul. But there isn't a chance in the world I can ever have you—even if you were willing. You'd be throwing yourself away. Why, I'm nothing, worse than nothing!" he finished bitterly.

"It doesn't make any difference to me because you say you're a failure."

"It's more than that, Elsie. Why, I'm not fit even to look at a girl like you!"

"I don't believe it," she responded. She paused, her eyes fixed on him, and said, with tremulous bravery, "And, Joe, I—I love you."

And so the most welcome news in the world came to Joe as his greatest punishment. For whatever sacrifice of reticence it cost Elsie to speak these words must be equalled by him. He must go straight with her.

"Listen, Elsie—I've got to tell you this, now." But he could not face her as he dealt

the blow. "I—I was in Sing Sing prison all last year."

"Joe!" Elsie cried. She withstood the horror of it for a moment, then sank down on the well seat.

"Yes—for robbery." Joe forced out the revelation. He even felt a sort of relief. The rest of the shameful story must be easier to tell. He ventured a look at Elsie, but her head was resting on her arm, on the well curb, and she was sobbing.

"Do you know why I ran away?" he asked, but she shook her head. "I was ordered off your place; told I'd be horsewhipped if I ever spoke to you again."

Then Joe took up the story of all the other things Elsie did not know. Of his failure in the City, his taking to the race-tracks, where he found work easily. Of the betting, and the drinking, due to the excitement of it. It seemed to Joe that drink was at the start and at the finish of his woes.

He told of the lost jobs, and of the realisation that he had passed out of Elsie's life, for she was going to a swell school, and horses were all he knew. Then he came to the run of luck; the five dollars magically multiplied to

two thousand, and all that this meant to him. But he omitted to tell the only creditable part of his tale—that he had refrained from drinking during this period. He told of Spider-Legs, and the fall that cost the racer his life, and Joe forty thousand dollars—the only loss that really "got" him; then of the debauch, and at its end his seeking the stall of the colt he was in love with.

"They find me lying in Firefly's stall," Joe concluded. "And I've got the owner's empty pocket-book that had twenty-five hundred in it when he lost it. How or why I took it—or what became of the coin, I don't know to this day."

Elsie had overcome her grief, and was watching Joe, tearfully and fixedly, during the last of his halting recital. "Joe—poor Joe," she murmured.

"Please don't give me any sympathy," he pleaded. "I'm not worth it."

Elsie came to him. "But, Joe,—I—I love you. And you never did anything else that was dishonest?"

Joe faced the wonder of her devotion and fought against taking advantage of it. "The

thing last night was dishonest," he replied doggedly.

"With father?"

"Yes—the money I gave your father came out of his safe—he only had it a minute—it was taken away from him and put back in the safe again."

Before Elsie could realise the atrociousness of this transaction, Betty Bascom appeared on the kitchen porch. She was a pleasant contrast to tragedy. She emptied a dustpan into a receptacle near the door. "Maw ain't back yet, is she?" Betty inquired. It being obvious that maw was not back, she continued: "My! Dinner'll be awful late. It's most noon, now."

"Oh, it can't be!" exclaimed Elsie, in alarm.

"I jest heard the eleven-forty comin' in," Betty confirmed, and returned to her duties.

Elsie turned in distress to Joe. "They're expecting father on that train," she said. "If you could only give him the money——"

"That's just what I wanted to do. I've been out all morning, trying to raise it," Joe broke in.

"I've got some money—I'll lend it to you."

"Elsie, I couldn't take your money!"

But Elsie did not heed. She had a plan. "Oh, I know a way, Joe. Don't worry about

father, it will be all right!" she cried, and ran out of the yard.

Joe looked after her, and did not worry about her father. He marvelled at her; at her love, her loyalty, her courage—all these were as wonderful to Joe Bascom as though no trusting woman had ever revealed them to a despairing man before.

CHAPTER XVI

DURING Joe's interview with Elsie Ezra lay in the grass and yawned, with unconcealed ennui. This was a dull climax to a morning of excitement spent on a wagon seat, from which point of vantage one could bark with safety at strange dogs, and gloat over their impotent rejoinders. Ezra sensed the meaning of human talk by its tones, and this boy and girl evidently spoke of trouble and sentiment —dull matter for an animal of his tastes.

He rose languidly and by chance picked up the scent of Muggs. Where that alluring rascal was there might be something doing, and Ezra hopefully followed the scent to the orchard. He found Mr. McCarthy loading his barrow with baskets of peaches. Mr. Gilbert was so far recovered as to assist rather feebly in the work. An interested group of small boys watched the task. From the pocket of each boy protruded a stick with notches cut in it; the account of the number of baskets he had filled.

Ezra greeted the men and boys with expressions of love, especially Lem Tuttle. On occasions when Lem had been stealing Mrs. Bascom's peaches, Ezra often had sat on guard under the tree, ready to attack any one who interfered with the thief. So he was reasonably fond of Lem.

"Ezra's a smart dog," Lem praised, throwing his slender arms around the animal's neck.

"Sure, he's smart," piped a shrill chorus.

Lem became impressive. "Last week he bit Deacon Tillinger on the leg," he confided.

"No?" Muggs demanded, and reached down and patted Ezra lovingly on the head.

"Say, if the dog's back, Joe must be back," exclaimed Gilly, and he and Muggs hurried toward the farmhouse, Muggs propelling his barrow. When they reached the yard Joe had finished marvelling at Elsie, and was speculating about his business troubles.

"Gee, I'm glad you're back," cried Muggs, as he dropped his wheelbarrow and came to Joe.

"Why—what's happened?" Joe asked.

"Wait till I tell you. We are all ready to blow, this morning, when we find out that nobody around here believes we bought the

peaches, so, to make a bluff, we go out in the orchard, and I hire a million kids to help pick 'em."

"How much you payin' 'em?" demanded Joe, in alarm.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Muggs hastened to reassure him. "I'm payin' 'em in peaches."

"Tillinger started that story," Joe decided gloomily. "He says you two are fakes, and he's comin' 'round with the big sheriff."

Gilly was lost in indignation at such ingratitude. "The old stiff!" he cried. "After me goin' to the trouble of puttin' that coin back in the safe."

"What luck did you have?" Muggs asked Joe.

"None. I carted twenty baskets to Centreville, and went to every market, fruit and grocery store in town. Say! You can't give peaches away."

"Did you have to bring 'em back?" Muggs queried.

"No, I sold 'em from house to house, but we can never get rid of them all that way."

There was a moment of depression. "Then

your mother'll find out we been lyin' to her——" Gilly burst out.

"Gilly, she mustn't find that out," Joe interrupted.

It seemed too awful to contemplate, and even Muggs appeared to be at the end of his resources. "How can we help it?" he asked.

"Well, I've got a scheme," Joe said slowly. "It's only one chance in a thousand, but it's something."

"What is it?" enquired Gilly.

"Listen! All the way home I'm tryin' to think of some excuse why you two bought the crop. I know we can't stall long, because the peaches will begin to spoil."

"There ain't no way to keep 'em from spoilin', is there?" Muggs was stirred to the depths by this possibility.

"Yes, there is—there's one way."

"Eh?" Gilly's mind was awake now.

"Make jam of them," Joe finished impressively.

"The kind we had last night?" demanded Muggs.

"That's the idea."

"Holy Jessie James!" Gilly exploded.

Explaining how this idea came to him, Joe

said, "I put a dozen jars of jam in the wagon, and it was a pipe selling it. Got fifty cents a jar for it, too."

"Fifty cents!" echoed Muggs.

He and Gilly probably were more absorbed in the plan than they ever had been in any scheme to plunder their fellow-men. Which may or may not prove Mark Twain's contention that morality is merely a matter of location.

Joe continued: "I've spread the story all over the village that we've organised a peach jam company. God knows how we can make it all, but we got to try and find some place where it can be done. Great Scott!" he finished fervently. "If I only could believe it would work."

Muggs had an inspiration, and introduced a fourth partner to the firm. A silent partner, whose characteristics were spiritual,—faith, belief, trust; whose name Muggs did not know, but in whom he had implicit confidence; to whom he had been introduced by Betty.

"Say! It will work if we believe it," he announced, with enthusiasm. "If you believe a thing, it'll come out just like you believe——"

"What are you talking about?" Joe interrupted perplexedly.

"Never you mind—just believe," asserted Muggs. He turned to Gilly, who did not seem to share his confidence, and gave him a hearty slap on the back. "Go on, Gilly, believe it!" he cried.

"Oh, my back!" moaned Gilly, his entire person expressive of pain, for the slap had landed on the temporary lump between his shoulders.

"Never mind your back—believe it!" Muggs commanded.

CHAPTER XVII

WHILE the partners were discussing the matter of how Faith, or whatever Muggs might call his belief, was to furnish the means to build and to conduct a large jam factory, Destiny was not idle, but was bringing Sammy Martin to the village, on the twelve o'clock train from the City.

Sammy was clad in a light suit, vehement in tone. The brightness of his tie vied with the suit; the loudness of the band on his straw hat outdid the tie. But all this blatancy of apparel was as nothing to Sam's disturbance of mind; pleasurable disturbance, for—by his own estimate—he was now a successful business man.

He leaped from the train, before it had fairly stopped, and almost ran along the dusty road. In the open spaces between the roadside trees the glare of the sunshine was abashed by that of Sam's apparel.

In one of the spaces he met Sally Tuttle, sister of Lem, aged eight, and clad in blue

gingham. She had spent a pleasant morning watching her brother and his kind pick peaches, and had intended to top it off by watching the twelve o'clock train come in. The whistle of the train, and Sam's appearance, warned her that this hope was vain. She greeted Sam, who replied briefly, and essayed to pass. But Sally was heavy with news, and stood in his way.

"Lem's picked almost three baskets of Mis' Bascom's peaches," she announced.

"What for?" demanded Sam, relinquishing his attempt at a flank movement.

"Why, those folks that's bought the crop is giving the boys a basket for every five they pick."

This titbit had an astounding effect on Sam. His jaw dropped and he glared at Sally disconcertingly.

"Who bought them peaches?" he almost yelled.

Sally's right index finger sought her mouth. "I dunno," she replied, confused.

"What are they going to do with 'em?" Sam demanded, as if Sally owed him the information.

Sally twisted the finger slowly around in her

mouth, and her eyes widened. "I dunno," she repeated.

"Didn't you hear?" the tone was accusing.

Sally's enunciation was faulty, owing to the twisting finger. "Why somebody said somep'n about a Slim Kate to make jam," she faltered.

"A Slim Kate!"

"Some kind o' Kate."

Sam pondered. "A syndicate?" he asked.

Sally gave a few little dejected nods. This was no spirit in which to receive news of moment. The pleasure of the morning was gone; so was her auditor, at a swifter pace than before. She looked after him, gloomily.

Sam's exertion made his round face redder than ever. When he reached the Bascom place he was long on excitement and short on breath. The partners were still in the yard. "Hello, Joe!" he gasped.

"Hello, Sammy," responded Joe, who had forgotten Sam and his ambitions, in the stress of his own worries.

But Muggs was impressed, enchanted by Sam's raiment. He approached and looked it over with great interest. "Say, kid, where's the circus?" he demanded. "Take me along with you, will you?"

Sammy resented this, with truculence. "I ain't goin' to no circus, and I don't know you, anyhow," he declared.

This seemed no drawback to Muggs, who threw an affectionate arm around Sammy's fat shoulder. "Come on, let's get acquainted," he invited.

Sam's response was to push Muggs away. "Go on, an' let me alone!" he cried.

"Nix, Muggs," cautioned Joe, to whom Sam turned.

"Say, what ails him?" he asked, referring to the smiling Muggs.

"He's all right, Sam. He's just a little playful, but he won't bite."

"Well, I ain't got no time to be playful now —I'm busy," asserted Sam. In bestowing sense on him Nature had carelessly omitted humour. "Where's Mis' Bascom?" he demanded.

"Gone out."

"Is it true she's sold the peaches?"

"Yes, that's true——"

"Who to?"

"To me," said Muggs.

Sammy's moon-like countenance had plenty of room for the display of expression, and all

the room was needed now. It might be thought that his disappointment, disgust and doubt were directed at Muggs, at whom he was looking. "She h'ain't!" he cried. He turned to Joe for confirmation of his fears. "Has she?" he asked.

"Yes, that's right, Sam."

Sammy did not exactly droop with despair, rather he caved. As Joe did not take him or his affairs seriously, and Gilly and Muggs regarded him as a curious bucolic specimen, his emotion received no sympathy.

And now Mrs. Bascom returned, with her market-basket. It held a steak, and her mind contained disquieting reflections, which showed no more than the steak. Mrs. Bascom had discussed local affairs with Mrs. Martin, and from her had learned of the doubt the village mind entertained about Muggs and Gilly, and their purchase of the peach crop—the doubt Deacon Tillinger had sowed on his way to the seven o'clock train.

Sam Martin approached her. He removed his hat, and smiled expansively, the only way he could smile. "How do, Mis' Bascom?" he said.

"Why, Sammy? How grand you look!" she replied, admiringly.

"Yes'm," he admitted. "I been to New York, on business. Have you sold your peaches to him?" and he indicated Muggs.

"Yes, he's bought the whole crop."

Hope being dead in that quarter, Sam turned and studied Muggs, with interest. He and Gilly were unloading the last barrow of peaches. Mrs. Bascom anxiously drew Joe aside.

"Joey, do you know what they're sayin' in the village?" she asked.

"Yes, mother, and I want to talk to you about that."

She sighed, "Oh, well, I'm awful late with dinner. I guess I'll have to get that first."

"I can tell you about it at the same time," Joe answered, anxious to reassure her. "I'll be back pretty soon, Sam." And he followed his mother into the house.

Whatever interest the situation now held for Mr. Martin centred in Mr. McCarthy. His mind was evidently grappling with some great problem, and regarded Mr. Gilbert's existence as a trifle, not to be considered. Mr. Gilbert, languid from his indisposition when work was

involved, was still helping his partner unload the peaches.

"Say, what are you going to do with the peaches?" Sam asked Muggs.

"Eat 'em," Muggs replied promptly.

"I heard there was a syndicate that's goin' to make Mis' Bascom's jam."

Muggs turned to Gilly with mock hopelessness. "There ain't no chance to keep a secret around here," he said.

This brought Gilly into the focus of Sam's mind. "Who's he?" he questioned.

"This gentleman is my partner," Muggs replied, with dignity.

Sam's interest grew as he enquired: "Are you two a syndicate?"

And Muggs' manner was off-hand as he answered: "Sure, we're a syndicate."

But behind Sam's questions was deep purpose. "And you're goin' to make jam of all that peach crop?" he asked earnestly.

"Right down to the last peach skin, kid."

"Who's goin' to sell it for you?"

"Why, can you sell some?" queried Muggs.

And Sam declared emphatically, "I can sell it all."

The partners now came to this bucolic speci-

men, one on each side, and Muggs, eyeing him with interest, said, "You can what?"

"You give me a chance an' I'll show you," Sam challenged.

"Well, you go right ahead and sell it," Muggs advised pertly, and returned to his peaches.

"Say, and hurry back with the money," Gilly chimed in with, and followed Muggs.

But Sam was on some firm business ground of his own, now, and was not to be discouraged. He drew a paper from his pocket, evidently an agreement. "Say, if you mean it, how would you like to sign this?" he demanded. "This" was of sufficient importance to bring the partners back to Mr. Martin.

"What is it?" Muggs asked.

"Oh, it's all square," Sam assured him. "I just gave Mr. Stevens, the lawyer, fifty cents to write it out for me."

"Read it," commanded Muggs.

Portentously but monotonously Sam read the agreement, filling in its spaces as his imagination dictated. " 'Know all men by these presents, that I, Blank—the Blank of the Blank Jam Company—for the sum of one dollar, lawful——' "

"One dollar!" Muggs interrupted, aghast.

"Oh, that's only the way a lawyer writes it," said Sam, and explained the contract in its entirety. "What it means, so's folks can understand it, is that you agree to give me one per cent. commission on the jam, and I guarantee to sell all you can make."

This lucidity did not help matters. Muggs was incredulous. "And you think we'd give you all that for one dollar? Say, listen! Anybody that wants to do business with this syndicate has got to put up some money—some regular money."

"How much do you want me to put up?"

"How much you got?"

"I got most three hundred dollars——"

But Sam could not finish. The partners were electrified. Gilly began a rear movement—possibly unconscious—rolling up his sleeve, the while, with the intent either to garrote Sam, or to extract the money by the finesse that had enabled him to instruct Houdini. Muggs faced Sam, and threw his arms wide open in invitation.

"Kiss me!" he cried.

Sam pushed him away, with force and scorn.

"Oh, stop foolin', will you, and talk business," he complained.

"Just show me that coin," urged Muggs.

From the inner pocket of his fat vest Sam drew a bankbook, fat with currency. This sudden appearance of an opportunity to get Joe out of his difficulties affected the partners deeply. They crowded eagerly against Sam, who mistook their interest for doubt.

"Oh, I got it, all right!" he assured them.

Behind Sam's back Gilly clenched both hands and cried, "Oh!" in an ecstasy of desire to exercise his profession.

It was now Sam's turn to doubt. "If I put up some money how do I know you're goin' to make the jam?" he demanded.

"I'm tellin' you," Muggs replied simply.

"I don't believe all I'm told," objected Sam. He summoned his business instincts to his aid, and they responded instantly. "Let me put it here," he continued, indicating the agreement, "that if you don't make the jam, I own the peaches, an' I'll give you two hundred and fifty dollars, as an advance on the first lot I sell."

Muggs restrained his eagerness and turned blandly to Gilly. "What do you say, Mr. Gilbert?" he asked.

And Gilly replied, also bland but decided, "I say count it and see if he's got two hundred and fifty."

Having restrained his direct business methods as long as possible, Muggs gave Sam a quick decision. "You're on, kid; hand over the coin," and he grabbed at the money.

"Wait a minute," Sam protested, drawing hastily back.

Muggs looked at him pityingly. "Gee, it's hard for you to give up, ain't it?" he said.

Sam drew from his pocket that badge, that supreme token of the business man, a fountain pen. He did it with an air of importance. Some of the commercial men who visited Tillinger's store carried in their vest pockets two —or even three!—fountain pens, held in security by small metal clasps. It was part of Sam's ambition to get to the three pen stage. He wrote on the agreement the clause regarding the peaches. He spoke defensively but astutely as he wrote. "I ain't givin' up till I get this signed. I worked four years for this money!" The writing finished, he questioned Muggs. "What's your name?"

"McCarthy."

"I want to write it in this blank," explained

Sam, suiting the action to the explanation. "What's your first name?"

"McCarthy," murmured the absorbed Muggs.

Sam looked up in surprise. "What, your first and last name just the same?" he asked.

"It's my middle name, too," announced Muggs. "McCarthy McCarthy McCarthy!"

Sam looked at him dubiously. "That's a hell of a name!" he ejaculated. Then he shoved the agreement toward Muggs. "Put it there," he said.

Muggs mistook his intention. "How are you?" he responded, fervently grasping Sam's hand.

Sam drew his hand away, in manifest annoyance. "No—I mean your name," he protested, and gave Muggs the paper and pen.

"I'll sign it in four places," Muggs agreed cheerfully. "Be gettin' that two fifty ready, kid."

"Don't you worry," replied Sam, and carefully counted the money. As he finished, Muggs, having signed his name, snatched the bills from him.

This eagerness disconcerted Sam. His confidence seemed to follow his hard-earned

money. He grasped at the latter, and Muggs shoved the agreement in his hand, in its stead. He looked at the partners doubtfully, as they counted the money. This certainly was a morning of disturbance for Sam Martin.

Joe entered the yard from the kitchen. He had reassured his mother; it had not been a hard task. Sam rushed to Joe, breathless with panic.

"Say, Joe, is this all right?" he demanded, showing him the agreement with its signatures. "If it ain't I can make it hot for him," and he turned belligerently to Muggs. "It would be obtaining money under false pretences!"

"What the blazes is this?" Joe had read the paper, with amazement.

"I paid 'em two hundred and fifty dollars for the right to sell their jam."

"You——" Joe broke off, as his mind struggled to take all this in. There was Muggs, waving the roll of bills that was to save Joe from disgrace and ruin. He approached Muggs, in wonder. Perhaps he had a jam factory in his other fist. Joe turned from the joyful faces of his partners to the round, anxious countenance of Sammy Martin, and his incredulity found an idea to clutch; to sustain

him in this whirl of events. "Where did you get two hundred and fifty dollars?" he asked.

"From the bank. I drew out all I had. Them fellers ain't cheatin' me, be they?"

"What makes you think you can sell the jam?"

"Never mind. All I want to find out is whether that paper's good."

Joe looked at the paper and reflected. If Sammy could sell the jam—and the advance money was a surety for that—there must be some way to make it; there *had* to be a way. "Sure, it is——" he began. But Sammy waited for no more. He snatched the agreement from Joe, and with it his lost confidence. "So long," he said, and started briskly away.

"Wait! Wait a minute!" cried the bewildered Joe, grabbing Sammy. "Who got you to do this?"

"Nobody," said Sam. "I done it my own self."

"Oh, no, you didn't. Tell me the truth, now."

"Honest, Joe," but disbelief was still written on Joe's face. "Only I found out where I could sell it."

"Where's that?"

Sam's face took on a fat look of caution—or perhaps a look of fat caution would be better phrasing. "Not much. If I told you, you might try to do me out of my commission."

"No, Sam, no one wants to beat you. We couldn't, anyhow—you've got the agreement."

Realisation of this broke suddenly and radiantly through the doubts that clouded Sam's sun-like face. He was another man. "Gosh, that's right!" he cried, with relief.

"Come on, tell us, Sam," Joe pleaded.

At the risk of being prolix it must be stated that this matter of selling Mis' Bascom's jam was one of vast importance to Sam Martin. It had been his dream when performing his humdrum duties in Tillinger's store; his problem when traversing the landscape, delivering Tillinger's goods. When it is remembered that his persistency in approaching Joe's mother on the subject had made that over-charitable lady opine that Sammy was not "quite right in his mind," one can realise what the obsession had done to him—made a mental recluse of him.

And now, with the problem solved, and the opportunity come to tell about it, it would be hard for mere word-painting to picture the self-importance, the eagerness of Sam's manner. If

you will consider yourself as having written that great book, or composed the opera, or sculped the statue, or having done what you most desire to do; then telling doubters of your ability how you did the trick, you may approximate the idea.

So Sam started: "Well, I got a man in New York who'll pay me thirty-six dollars a gross for all the jam he can git. And that man," he continued impressively, "is Henry W. Parker!"

"Henry W. Parker," echoed Joe.

"Who is he?" Muggs asked.

"Who *is* he?" Sam was astounded at their ignorance. "He's the biggest wholesale grocer in the country, an' I was talkin' to him just the same as if he was nobody."

"Sweetheart!" cried Muggs, and rapturously embraced Sam, only to be violently repulsed.

"Now you stop!" cried the embracee, disgusted. "Say, Joe, keep him away, can't you?"

"He's all right, Sam," Joe reassured him, and in the importance of the coming tale the affectionate one was overlooked.

Sam seated himself on the well seat, and began with great absorption: "Well, Mr. Parker came through here with an automobile

party about a month ago. They were hungry, and they wa'n't no hotel, so they bought a lot of stuff at the store. I waited on him, and sold him a jar of Mis' Bascom's preserves." In his interest in the recital Muggs leaned over, with his face near Sam's, who now looked up and hastily drew away from the proximity, with unconcealed aversion. Muggs retired, unabashed, and Sam continued:

"A week after that the Deacon commenced to get letters from the Parker Company, and next thing I knew he was tryin' to buy this place. Then I heard him tell Mis' Tuttle to make some jam for him, an' try to have it like your ma made, an' he sent a sample of it to the Parker Company. I suspicioned somethin' was goin' on, and yesterday, when your ma agreed I could sell some, I says to myself, 'I'm goin' to see Mr. Parker.' I was at his place at six this morning, but he didn't open up till eight o'clock. When he come he wasn't goin' to see me, but you bet I got into his office, an' I told him the whole thing."

During this, the narrative portion of his recital, Sam's interest and speed had increased, and now that he was approaching the drama, as it were, he took on excitement. It was really

wonderful how so fat a boy found breath for the explosive utterance that followed.

"As soon as I got started he says into the telephone, 'Don't let me be interrupted,' he says." It is hardly to be believed that Sam's gruff imitation of Mr. Parker was faithful. "Then he tasted some jam from the jar I brought direct from Mis' Bascom, and he says, 'That's it!' he says. 'How much can you get of that?' he says, and gosh, he was excited." Sam was fairly volcanic now. He spoke not only with his mouth, but with his eyes, his cheeks, his pumping arms, his heaving chest. "And then we figured as near as we could how many jars this crop would make, and he was tickled to death, an' he says, 'It'll be the biggest thing of the kind on the market.' "

The revelation had not failed in its effect on the three partners—this fairy-tale, told by a fat, enterprising, glorious gnome. They looked at each other as its full import sank into their minds. Then Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Gilbert gave way to enthusiasm. Each grasped a hand of Mr. Martin, and with him an unwilling part of their circle, they danced around on the grass in what was known in fairy-tale days as "Ring around the Rosy."

This excited great indignation in Sam. He was a man of action, not of moods. He jerked himself away from the pair and dashed, panting, to Joe. "Let's go in the house an' get away from him," he cried, meaning Muggs, and he started to go.

But Joe, who felt like singing or dancing himself, drew Sam back and reassured him afresh: "Oh, he's all right; he won't trouble you."

"No, my partner will hold me," declared Muggs. "Hold me," he ordered Gilly.

"Sure," said Gilly, and grasped Muggs firmly by the arm.

Somewhat heartened by this act of restraint, Sam drew another paper from his pocket and prepared to revel in statistics.

"Here's how it figured out—look!" he began, and they all gathered about the paper. "Your orchard is five acres, a hundred and thirty-five trees to the acre; countin' ten baskets to a tree and sixty peaches to the basket, makes four hundred and five thousand peaches, or more than a hundred thousand jars of jam. Parker offered thirty-six dollars a gross; and takin' out five thousand for jars, labels, labour

and everythin', leaves you over twenty thousand dollars."

"Oh!" Muggs' arms stretched forth to embrace again this magician who transformed dull business into romance.

The magician, at the end of his patience, cried, "Look out, now!" and swung with both stout arms, his fists missing Muggs, who leaped lightly back.

Joe intervened, with praise, with ardour. "Sam, you're a corker," he cried, buttonholing him. "Now do something for me, quick—and I may raise that one per cent. Get the first train back to New York, and find out if Mr. Parker will see me in the morning."

"Will you pay my expenses?"

"If the jam business wins out I'll pay 'em for the rest of your life," Joe promised, propelling Sam toward the road.

"The next train goes in ten minutes," Sam demurred, looking at his watch.

"Well, grab it," and Joe pushed him harder.

"But I ain't had no dinner," Sam protested, over his shoulder.

"Oh, forget your dinner."

Urged by Joe and ambition, Mr. Martin

started. "But I'm gettin' awful hungry," he avowed. "I ain't had nothin' all day but peanuts," and breaking into a waddling run, he disappeared around a corner of the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

As Sam swerved out of the Bascom yard, he nearly collided with a stranger, who was approaching it. This man was middle-aged, compact of form, quiet of dress, and with an air of leisurely but keen observance. Sam's haste attracted his attention, he took him in with a glance, and his thoughts instantly spelled the word "rube."

He, too, had come on the twelve o'clock train, but his business seemed not to require the breathless haste of Sam's. He glanced appraisingly at the Bascom place, and entered the front gate.

Meanwhile the partners had not recovered from their elation, and were considering the future.

"Boys, twenty thousand dollars a year!" Joe cried.

With forethought Muggs had divided the money, and he now triumphantly held up two portions of it. "Here's one hundred and twenty-five dollars for the Deacon and one hun-

dred and twenty-five dollars for the syndicate," he announced.

"Just give me that," said Joe, taking one of the portions. "I want to give it to Tillinger."

The stranger now appeared from around the house, possibly attracted by the voices. "Say, can you tell me where Mr. Tillinger lives?" he began, but stopped at sight of Muggs and Gilly. "Hello!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

The pair shared the surprise, and added fear to it. They spoke softly, but excitedly.

"Callahan!" cried Muggs.

"Who?" Joe asked.

"A bull!" Gilly breathed.

"Nailed!" exclaimed Muggs.

"A detective?" Joe said.

"Sure!" replied Gilly.

Mr. Callahan did not seem disturbed. He was inured to such receptions. He descended on the partners, with quiet dignity.

"Well, what's this all about?" he asked, almost genially. He seemed human, though blunt, but behind his kindliness was a force that was disconcerting.

Muggs had recovered his aplomb, and spoke innocently. "Hello, Callahan; what's the matter?" he asked.

"That's what I want to know," the officer replied, and he looked steadily and speculatively at Messrs. McCarthy and Gilbert. "There's somethin' doin', or Slippery Muggs and Dynamite Gilly wouldn't be hangin' around here."

"Soft pedal on those names, will you?" Muggs implored. "We ain't doin' nothin', are we, Gilly?"

"Not a thing—on the square," declared Gilly, whom the presence of the bull affected more deeply than it did Muggs.

"Just payin' a visit to Mr. Bascom, here," Muggs continued.

The detective transferred his attention and his suspicions to Joe. "How do you do, Mr. Bascom?" he asked.

"How are you?" responded Joe.

"Do you know these men?"

"Yes, they're pals of mine."

"Is that so?" Callahan said wonderingly, and glanced around the place with renewed interest.

Muggs came to him earnestly. "Now, don't go mixin' him up in anythin'—he ain't in our business."

"Oh, shut up!" Callahan snapped, and turned to Joe. "You live here?"

"Yes, sir."

This instantly diverted the detective's attention to the house, which he inspected carefully. He was a man of many interests, and might have proved pleasing to some, but to poor Gilly he was a spectre of the past. In allegory he would have represented Tragedy treading on the heels of Triumph. So Gilly's feelings led him to steal quietly toward the road, with intent to escape. But Muggs stopped him. Belief and bluff had done so much for Muggs, since the night before, that he still had hope.

Having finished his inspection of the house, Mr. Callahan resumed his tone of wonderment and geniality. "Well, this looks great!" he said. "You couldn't have picked out a better spot. Nice little story for the Chief, this is——" and he broke off as he again regarded the house. "Of course, that house ain't got a bit of stolen property in it," he finished sarcastically.

"No, it hasn't," Joe replied indignantly.

"Oh, no—and so there ain't no harm in havin' a look through it."

Joe was made desperate by the thought of

the detective's appearing before his mother, and cried, "Yes, there is. You've got no right to go in there——"

But Callahan broke in warningly. "Easy, now; don't try to pull anything on me. I'm goin' to look through every inch of that shack." He swept the partners with his glance, and resumed his pleasant tone, which seemed to make his advice more deadly. "And if you three know what's good for you, you'll be nice—see? Nice!"

There was something about Mr. Callahan that discouraged the idea of attacking him. It did not occur to Muggs and Gilly, who were handy in any sort of combat, nor to Joe, who was no weakling. So he looked on, in despair, as the detective started to ascend the porch steps.

And then Mrs. Bascom opened the kitchen door and stepped out on the porch, and Callahan stopped abruptly.

"Dinner's ready, boys——" she announced, and seeing the detective, ended with "Oh!"

She smiled on that upholder of the law, and Callahan, who was as astonished as though an angel had stepped out of a pawnshop, looked at her fixedly. And slowly his

hand went up to his soft hat, and removed it.

Joe spoke quietly. "Mr. Callahan, this is my mother."

Mrs. Bascom beamed on him, and extended her hand. "I'm real glad to meet you, Mr. Callahan," she said.

"Thank you," he replied. He took her hand, and it was his turn to be uncomfortable.

Callahan's angel would have been as unconscious of the ill-fortune he represented as Mrs. Bascom. "We're just goin' to have dinner; won't you stay?" she invited.

"You're very kind, but I——"

"Oh, do; it won't take a minute to set another place."

Joe stumbled into the situation. "We—we've got a little business to talk over first, mother," he explained.

"Oh, well, don't hurry! But you'll get Mr. Callahan to stay?"

"I'll try."

"That's right. Come in when you're ready." In the doorway she smiled again at the detective, and went happily into the house.

Callahan looked after her. Her smile had been bad for his business, for it dissolved distrust and suspicion, his tools of trade. This prob-

ably was not what he thought about as he stood for a moment immovable. Then he turned to the boys, whose eyes were fixed on him anxiously. "The search thing is off," he said gruffly.

Joe went to him gratefully. "Thank you, Mr. Callahan. Why, my mother's always lived in this village. Anybody'll tell you she's all right."

"Say, I wasn't born yesterday. I know she's all right," the detective replied, almost angrily. He indicated the thoroughly subdued Muggs and Gilly. "But you want to be careful about the friends you have around you."

"We've both been keepin' straight, Callahan," Gilly protested.

The officer studied them doubtfully. "I'd like to believe that," he said.

Strong in his new faith, this presented no difficulties to Muggs, who broke in brightly, "Want me to tell you how to believe it?"

"No, I want you to get out," Callahan answered.

"Who tipped you off we was here?"

"Nobody. I'm on some other business, but I thought I'd have to quit it long enough to take you guys back." His look at them was less reassuring than his words.

"Who are you after?" asked Muggs, by way of being lightly conversational.

"Not you, I'm glad to say," the detective returned grimly. As he started to go, relief was written large on the faces of Muggs and Gilly. But he stopped for a last word of warning. "You behave yourselves, now."

"You bet!" Muggs cried.

"Sure!" added Gilly.

"So long," said Callahan, and he moved off.

"So long," echoed Gilly.

"Bye-bye," responded Muggs.

It seemed that disaster was again fended from its course by the wonderful, the all-pervading faith, or belief, or whatever it was, that Muggs could not define, that radiated from Mrs. Bascom.

Muggs had not become so spiritual as to disbelieve that Callahan could be squared, when the jam business was on a prosperous footing, and that he and Gilly could live happily ever after in the village. But Destiny was bearing down hard on the village this day. Another agent was even now approaching. This moment's breathing spell of relief was specious, though happily the partners did not know it.

CHAPTER XIX

EZRA sat in the road, near the Bascom gate, and idly watched the detective leave the yard. He was an upholder of the law, therefore not an object of interest. During Callahan's interview with the boys Ezra had been intent on other business, but he sensed authority in the man that was distasteful.

Deacon Tillinger—the other agent of Destiny—hurried up the road, from the direction of the village. He had arrived from Peekskill on the eleven-forty train, had been detained at his store, and was coming, with zest, to the unpleasant task before him.

Ezra eyed the Deacon with dislike verging on repugnance. His subtle, ambushed-behind-the-law method of doing evil lacked the charm of action so dear to Ezra's heart. Hence had he bitten him on the leg. The Deacon, his face distrustful, his legs timorous, made a cautious detour of Ezra, and entered the yard.

Mr. Callahan saw Tillinger coming, and stopped. He observed the haste, seemingly a

characteristic of the local rube. But Callahan was a student of haste, among other things, and he analysed the Deacon's as differing from Sammy's. It had rancour, animosity, antagonism and other qualities that Sammy's lacked. This haste, considered with the presence of Muggs and Gilly, gave promise of developments, and Callahan followed Tillinger into the yard. And Ezra followed Callahan, hoping for action. Despite Ezra's personal appearance, he was the least menacing of the three.

Deacon Tillinger appeared in the yard as the partners were ending their sigh of relief at the departure of Callahan. The Deacon pervaded the scene darkly, as an overturned bottle of ink does a new, clean, white blotter. He greeted Muggs and Gilly as follows:

"Ha! You two scallawags are here yet, be you?"

But Joe spoke quietly. "What business is that of yours?" he asked.

"You'll find it's my business. Your ma owned up, this mornin', that this farm was mine, and the man I sold it to is comin' here to claim it."

"When he comes we'll talk to him."

"But them rowdies are pickin' my peaches,

an' if they don't clear out an' let 'em alone, I'll have 'em both in the calaboose," stormed the Deacon.

The detective re-entered the yard in time to overhear these words. He joined the group. "What's that?" he demanded.

Joe appealed to him desperately. "The peaches don't belong to him, Mr. Callahan."

"Perhaps the hundred and twenty-five dollars they stole last night didn't belong to me," the Deacon countered sarcastically.

Callahan's face lighted up as his worst hopes were agreeably confirmed, and he approached Muggs and Gilly. "So—you have been pulling something!" he said. Then he asked the Deacon: "Is your name Tillinger?"

"Yes."

"I was looking for your place. Perhaps I can be of some help to you," and Callahan displayed his badge of office. "I'm from New York Police Headquarters."

"A detective!" cried the Deacon. "I'm mighty glad you're here."

"Tell me what the trouble is."

"Last night one of these fellers picked my pocket."

The officer's eyes roved to Muggs, then back to Tillinger. "Which one?" he questioned.

The Deacon was a bit uncertain about this. He thought the robbery had taken place when he was thrown out of Sister Bascom's kitchen the night before. But naturally his mind had been confused during the unheard-of process. Being in doubt, he took no chances. "Well, I guess both of 'em had a hand in it," he hazarded.

"Have you just found it out?" Callahan went on.

"No, I missed the money out of my pocket last evenin', but I thought I'd lost it, at first—spent half the night lookin' for it." At the memory he favoured Muggs and Gilly with a savage look. "Scoundrels!" he cried venomously.

Then Joe broke in, still quiet. "He can't prove that any of us took his money, Mr. Callahan."

"I can prove one of 'em assaulted me," sputtered the Deacon.

"Assaulted you?" echoed Callahan, in surprise.

"Yes, he did."

The Deacon pointed at Muggs, who had

been rather overdoing an expression of innocence. Also he had been thinking. While the detective had questioned Tillinger, Muggs had taken the syndicate's one hundred and twenty-five dollars from his pocket, and suggested dumbly to Gilly that he consign the cash to one of the Deacon's pockets, and thus relieve the situation. But Gilly's confidence in himself was still shaken. He declined the commission.

Left to his own resources, Muggs approached Tillinger, in virtuous indignation. "I didn't assault you," he cried, then appealed to the detective. "Why, Callahan, he was in the kitchen, usin' insultin' language to Mr. Bascom, and all I did was just to push him out, easy, like that."

Muggs clutched the Deacon, and illustrated his ejection of the night before. It was a faithful imitation, with one exception. On the first occasion the Deacon was relieved of one hundred and twenty-five dollars; on this, a like amount was restored to him.

He was almost speechless at the renewed indignity. "Take your hands off'n me!" he managed to yell.

And Muggs moved away, slapping his hands together lightly, either in satisfaction at his

artistry, or to remove contamination from contact with the Deacon.

Absorbed in his own thoughts, Joe had not seen the struggle, but he turned at the sounds of it. "Don't, Muggs," he cautioned. Then he confronted the Deacon and impressively announced: "Mr. Tillinger, you lost that money last night."

"I never lost a cent in my life," the Deacon denied, untruthfully.

Joe drew from his pocket half of Sam Martin's advance payment; the money he had intended to restore to Tillinger. Muggs and Gilly looked on in horror. Behind the detective's back they pawed the air, in unseen warnings to Joe, but he went serenely on to his doom.

"Oh, yes, you did," he assured the Deacon, "for I found it on the porch this morning." And he handed him the roll of money.

The Deacon accepted the currency ungraciously. He was shrewdly contemptuous as he counted it. "Ah, you're givin' it back now, tryin' to keep out of limbo," he accused, "but you'll find——" He stopped abruptly. In putting the money into his vest pocket his fingers encountered the roll placed there by

Muggs. He looked up in surprise. He drew forth both rolls of bills. He stood, with one in each hand, the picture of astonishment. Money never had come thus easily to him before.

"What's this?" asked Callahan.

"Another hundred and twenty-five dollars!" gasped Tillinger, amazedly counting the last roll.

And then Elsie Tillinger ran into the yard, eager, breathless, triumphant. "Father!" she cried. "I just found the money you lost, under the hall sofa!" And she extended a third roll of bills to the Deacon.

Mr. McCarthy was the first to recover from the general numbness of mind that followed Miss Tillinger's statement. "He's got his money, ma'am," he assured her. He snatched one of the rolls from the bewildered Deacon. "That's my coin that Mr. Bascom found——" he began.

"Hold on!" interposed the detective, grasping Muggs by the arm. "Let's see about all this." The situation was too much even for him, but he was willing to take time to unravel it. The others were not. They began loud and unreliable explanations, that grew louder

as they progressed. "Wait a minute!" Callahan shouted above the clamour, and it ceased.

"I can explain it, Mr. Callahan," declared Joe.

"Well, explain it, then," the detective said dryly.

"I will," Joe started, with false confidence, and doubts of how he would finish. "Last night I paid him——" His eye fell on the beautiful, flushed face of Elsie Tillinger, and he stopped. It was sordid business, this, and he had mixed Elsie in it. Now he must try to get her out, but if he failed—— He opened the house door. "Miss Tillinger, would you mind going inside?" he asked, and she started to go.

"Elsie, I want you to go home," ordered her father.

Elsie stopped, uncertainly, but Joe said, "You can go this way, just as well." And as she passed into the house he murmured fervently to her, "God bless you!"

"Now, then, Mr. Bascom," said Callahan, inviting the explanation.

"I can tell you——" the Deacon cried.

But the detective stopped him. "Just a mo-

ment," he said firmly. "I can only hear one at a time."

Muggs and Gilly watched Joe anxiously. He floundered in the deep water of doubt for a moment, then his eye fell on the baskets of peaches, which were some sort of footing, and he began: "Mr. Callahan, do you see those peaches?"

"Do you think I'm blind?" enquired the detective.

Joe dashed to a basket, took a peach from it, and extended it with éclat to Callahan. "Try one," he urged.

The officer regarded him stolidly. "Are you trying to bribe me?" he demanded.

But Joe had a better footing now—based on the Deacon's evil motives. He pointed at him, and answered the detective. "No, I'm tryin' to tell you that my mother has an orchard full of them—and this man's tryin' to cheat her out of it."

"It's a lie!" screamed Tillinger. "She was poor, and I sold this place to help her and make her comfortable."

"You didn't sell it at all," Joe denied. "Mr. Callahan," he demanded of the patient officer, "do you think he'd sell a peach orchard of—of

—wait a minute——" details escaping him, he reached into his pocket, drew out Sammy's sheet of statistics, and quoted glibly—" 'one hundred and thirty-five trees to the acre, and ten baskets to the tree, sixty peaches to the basket,' when he knew that those peaches would make more than twenty thousand dollars' worth of jam a year?" Joe turned from Callahan to Tillinger. "You knew all this when you tried to get the place, and I can prove it," he accused.

What Callahan thought of Joe's statistics, or of the Deacon's guilty knowledge, never was to be known, nor was it of moment, for there was an interruption.

Lester Morgan entered the yard briskly. He was well-groomed, suave as ever, and ready to begin his career as a farmer, under the patronage of the charitable Deacon. He began this career by being late. Having missed the twelve o'clock train from New York, and being too impatient to wait two hours for another local, he had taken an express to Ossining, and an automobile from there.

The Deacon greeted him eagerly with: "Ah! Here's the man I sold the place to. Perhaps you'd better hear what he's got to say—Mr.

Morgan," he added, by way of introduction.

But Lester gave no heed to the Deacon. He was gazing fixedly at Joe, his face alight with surprised, vicious recognition. "Pete Turner!" he exclaimed.

Joe stared at Lester, transfixed, horrified, mute. After all his vicissitudes, here was his sin come to find him out, through the most unexpected of agents. And to pile humiliation on misery, that agent the suitor of Elsie Tillinger!

The Deacon's harsh voice broke into the horror of it. "His name's Joe Bascom," he corrected Lester.

"His name's what?" Lester sneered.

"Joe Bascom," explained the Deacon. "He's the feller that's holdin' up this place."

"Oh, he won't hold it up much longer when I tell you about him." Joe winced at what was to come, but Lester revelled in the telling. "Mr Tillinger," he cried, pointing at Joe, "that man robbed my father of twenty-five hundred dollars, and spent last year in—in——"

Mrs. Bascom had come, unseen, from the kitchen. Callahan had remained unnoticed in the background. He moved to Lester, and as

the word Sing Sing was about to leave his lips, the detective's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Mr. Morgan, I want you," he said, in low, even tones.

Lester turned and looked at Callahan with dull wonder, which slowly grew to horror as the officer drew back his coat and displayed his badge.

"Your father sent me for you," Callahan continued. "He's found out who's been robbing him, now. He knows all about those notes, checks and everything."

As Callahan's composed voice dealt out purgatory to one boy and heaven to the other, a great realisation burst through Joe's relief, and turned it to fury.

"Ah! I know, now—it was you—you stole that money—you had me sent away for a year —you——" Joe screamed the words, and choked with the feeling they would not express. He raised both clenched hands high above his head and rushed at Lester.

But Mrs. Bascom came between them. "Joe!" she cried.

And Joe threw himself frantically into her arms. "Mother, I can tell you now—I can tell you everything!" he sobbed.

CHAPTER XX

TIME, the miracle-worker, being eccentric, like most geniuses, and having crowded into a few brief hours occurrences that should have taken months, had passed the Bascom farm in a more leisurely but not uneventful manner. Summer was on the way again, and spring was on the spot.

The house was transformed. A bay-window bulged from its side; dormers popped from its roof; its "stoop" had become a veranda. It was gay with white paint and green. It was faced by a trim lawn, with orderly flower-beds. It was—but why more details? Why not leave to your imagination prosperity's other touches to the Bascom house?

Ezra sat in the yard, and over the posie-spangled meadows the redolent breath of spring blew balmily on him. He was a changed dog. Around his neck was a wide, plutocratic collar, encrusted with stones that resembled turquoises, but were not, and from which protruded sharp,

brass spikes. Some of the stones were missing.

The collar was the gift of Ezra's friend Muggs, and when Mis' Tuttle's near-collie had investigated it, the spikes had pricked his nose, causing pain and desire for combat. In the ensuing conflict the spikes and stones had caused more pain to the assailant's teeth, and victory had been Ezra's. Such also had been the case with Mis' Martin's almost-setter, Deacon Tillinger's pure-blooded Newfoundland, and several other canines. The collar was at once a lure and an armour. Ezra soon would be the most feared dog in the village. So joy sang in his heart.

Ezra was watching the unloading of various kinds of food from a large touring-car, which stood in the road. Several persons were engaged in this work—a neatly uniformed chauffeur; a foreign-looking man who evidently was a chef; a smooth-faced man who resembled an English lord with his character extracted, and undoubtedly was a waiter; a pretty, trim young woman named Katie, who has been Mrs. Bascom's maid-of-all-work for several months; and Mrs. Bascom herself, solicitous and slightly rattled.

The touring-car was the property of Mr.

Samuel Martin. The food was intended by him for a dinner, which the chef and waiter were to prepare and serve. The occasion was the home-coming, later in the day, of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bascom, after a three weeks' honeymoon.

In a few brief months Sammy Martin had shown that he was a business man. He was now head salesman for the Henry W. Parker Company, the largest firm of its kind in the country, where he was known as "our Mr. Martin." And what Sammy had revealed of his career was as the band-wagon to the circus parade compared to what he would show in the future.

While his car was being unloaded he was in the Bascom Preserve Factory, consulting with two of its proprietors, Lucius McCarthy and Dudley Gilbert, in regard to increasing their output for the coming season. Like the Bascom homestead, the factory was gay with paint; also illuminated with signs, and crowned with tall chimneys. During the preserving season it hummed with many voices; with the laughter of girls, and the lower tones of men, through which occasionally sounded the dulcet notes of

Mrs. Bascom, the priestess under whose supervision the nectar-like jam was prepared.

Last year the factory had disgorged over one hundred thousand jars of preserves; this year it would disgorge many more—so it soon would be in the throes of enlargement. Verily, Mis' Bascom's jam had the world by the palate.

And Dudley Gilbert sat in a private office, in consultation with his fellow magnates, his brow wrinkled with important thoughts. Among them was no room for thought of a lonely, moonlit, deserted bakery, with weed-grown grounds, before which he had paused, one night last summer, on his way to rob Deacon Tillinger's safe. But lo! that poor, desolate shell of a building was now the Bascom Preserve Factory!

That evening as dusk was creeping over the hills toward the red-tinged west, Mr. Martin's guests sat in the dining-room of Mrs. Bascom's house. The girls were in tasteful dinner dresses, the boys in Fifth Avenue evening-dress. Mrs. Bascom wore becoming black, the Deacon an important-occasion frock suit. Joe and Elsie glowed with the joy of bridegroom and bride, which poets still are trying to define.

And with their joy they had brought presents for the others. For Mrs. Bascom a diamond bar-pin. For Sam Martin a watch which indicated the hour and its fractions, with a tiny, tinkling bell. For the Deacon a gold-headed cane. For Jessie Strong a beautiful bracelet. Betty's present was to come later. "The guy in the store, in New York" had been remiss.

The chef's last course had disappeared, so had he. His had been a triumph. He aimed at excitation rather than repletion, and adjectives quailed before his excellence. Mr. Martin, who had social aspirations—indeed, was now a social lion, in the eyes of his friends—could find no fault, though the gaucherie of Messrs. McCarthy and Gilbert's treatment of some of the delicate viands had caused him unexpressed annoyance.

The mental as well as the physical had been satisfied. Joe Bascom had made a speech, sparkling with such gems of thought as: "This is the happiest moment of my life," and "The best part of going away is getting home!" Truly, it was a happy occasion.

Mrs. Bascom and Deacon Tillinger left the chattering young people, and strolled, in the fading light, to the well. Beyond was the

faithful orchard of fortune, now gay with its spring panoply of pinkish-white blossoms, which moved with the soft breeze, or fell, fluttering and ghost-like, to the ground.

They found the trim maid, Katie, in the yard. On a table she was setting a large tray, containing a coffee percolator, with its attendant after-dinner cups, spoons and sugar, reinforced by cigars and cigarettes.

"Mercy sakes, Katie, what's that?" demanded Mrs. Bascom.

"Coffee, ma'am. Mr. Martin told me to put it out here, after I served the dessert."

Katie had served the dinner with distinction, her mistress having dismissed the noble-appearing waiter, for fear of hurting her feelings. The maid disappeared, and Mrs. Bascom viewed the aftermath of the meal dubiously.

"Well, it was a mighty stylish dinner," the Deacon admitted. "If eatin' all them vittles at night don't kill us. And now, coffee—in them little cups! What be we all comin' to!" But he helped himself gingerly to the coffee, and liberally to the sugar. He was about to partake, when politeness caught up to him, and he offered the cup to Sister Bascom. "Won't you have some?" he asked.

"I wouldn't sleep a wink," she declined.

"That pin shows up good on you," said the Deacon, regarding the glitter of the stones against the blackness of her dress. "Real diamonds, Elsie says."

"Yes," Mrs. Bascom sighed; "I hate to think what it cost 'em. And that's a nice present you got."

The Deacon held up his cane, which he clutched as though it were a spear. "Yes, 'tis, but I ain't feeble enough to need it yet—thank the good Lord!" he avowed.

Mr. Callahan came in the yard and advanced doubtfully. Spring seemed to have entered his blood, as indicated by a modest, light suit and stylish straw hat. "Tillinger?" he questioned, then recognised Joe's mother. "Oh, Mrs. Bascom, good-evening," he said.

"Why, if it ain't the detective!" exclaimed the Deacon.

Mrs. Bascom shook hands with him. "Of course, it's Mr. Callahan! Well, this is a surprise!"

"Have you lost any money lately?" Callahan enquired pleasantly of Tillinger.

"Huh!" snorted the Deacon. "Joe told me all about that. Smartest trick I ever heard of.

Made me like them boys the minute I found it out."

Mr. Callahan turned to Mrs. Bascom. "So the Deacon and your son are friends, now?"

"Friends! Why, I'm his father-in-law!"

"Yes, I knew that," declared the detective, with such smiling emphasis that the Deacon regarded him uncertainly, wondering what he really meant. But Callahan was admiring the reconstructed house. Even the kitchen porch had not escaped expansion. "I didn't recognise your house, at first," he said. "Walked right by it. You've done a lot of improvin' since I was here."

"Joe has."

"Well, I want to see your son, on a little matter of business." And at Mrs. Bascom's slight start of dismay, Callahan added: "Oh, don't worry. It's nothing—er—professional."

"They're all in the dining-room," Mrs. Bascom chirped, in relief. "Won't you come right in?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather see him alone first. Suppose I step into the kitchen, and you tip him off I'm here—and tell him on the quiet."

The Deacon agreed to do this, and as the detective followed Mrs. Bascom into the

kitchen, he disappeared around the house, carrying out his idea of secrecy by bawling: "Joe! I got something to tell you!"

So Joe joined Callahan in the kitchen, and they conferred mysteriously, and things passed between them that shall be told of later. And they spoke of Lester Morgan's trial, during which he had confessed to the theft of his father's twenty-five hundred dollars, at Belmont Park, a year ago. Knowing the money was in his father's paddock coat, hanging in the trainer's room, Lester had returned to Belmont Park that night. Had opened the door of the Morgan stables with his own key. The groom had been asleep. Lester had taken the money from the wallet, tossed the wallet into Firefly's stall, and crept out, forgetting to lock the door. So the chain of circumstances that led to Joe's apparent guilt had been completed.

And Callahan, somewhat overawed by the festivities, firmly refused to go to the dining-room, and become a belated feaster. But in the kitchen, served by the impressed Katie, he gravely and impartially partook of caviar, strange soup, unknown salad and other aristocratic food.

To Muggs and Gilly Sam Martin's dinner had been a series of social rites, difficult of performance. They had imitated Sam through a course of baffling prongs, spoons, knives and forks, and had not allowed those implements to kill the joy of the meal for them. Muggs had whispered aside to Gilly, "He's showin' us how the four hundred eat," and they had followed as well as they could. So why worry?

Now Sam insisted on their leaving the table —and Betty and Jessie!—and they were inclined to rebel.

"What's he going to do next?" whispered Gilly, as they followed him around the house; and "What's the idea?" openly demanded Muggs, as they reached the back yard.

"This is the right way, I tell you," Sam replied. "After dinner the gentlemen and ladies separate. Us gentlemen ought to have cigars and coffee by ourselves, and then pretty soon join 'em again," and he took a cigar from the box on the tray.

"When do we do that?" Gilly asked anxiously.

"Oh, I'll let you know. It's when I say, 'Supposin' we join the ladies.' Help yourselves to cigars." Muggs and Gilly responded

readily. Each grasped a handful of cigars. Mr. Martin was annoyed. "No, one apiece," he protested. In the absence of the ladies he gave way to discouragement. "My God, but you're provincial!" he declared.

"We're what?" puzzled Muggs.

"Provincial. You don't know how to act right. They wouldn't know what to make of you two at one of Henry W. Parker's dinners."

"So you're pullin' off this dinner the way they do at Parker's, are you?" questioned Muggs.

"As near as I can," said Sam, puffing discontentedly at his cigar, "but it's hard to do anything with a couple of rubes like you." He filled one of the tiny cups with coffee and offered it to Muggs, who looked at it anxiously.

"Can you spare that much?" he enquired.

"Oh, go on, take it!" grumbled Sam. He then filled a cup for Gilly, and resolving not to lose his poise with this unversed pair, reverted to his society manner, which included an entire change of accent. "Demi-tasse, old boy?" he drawled.

"What?" asked Gilly.

"Do you want coffee?" Sam translated angrily, dropping the accent.

"Sure," Gilly replied mildly.

"Well, here," and he shoved the cup at Gilly.

By this time Muggs had drained his cup, and with a "Next" extended it to Sam, whose feelings rendered him speechless. He refilled the cup, and returned it to Muggs, who was neither bewildered nor subdued.

"It's all right, ain't it?" he blandly asked Gilly.

"It's swell," Gilly admitted, and he passed his cup to Sam for refilling.

This act restored Mr. Martin's speech. "Oh, wait a minute, now!" he yelped, "till I get some for myself." And added bitingly to Gilly, "The next dinner I give, I'll have your coffee put in a trough!"

Mrs. Bascom and Joe left the busy Callahan for a moment, and broke into Sam's disgust, quenching it. "Excuse my being late, Mr. Martin; I was detained on business," Joe apologized, with proper formality. "Oh, thank you," and he appropriated Sam's untasted coffee.

"But business matters and dinners don't go together," chided Mr. Martin, as he drew from the percolator what he hoped would be a final demi-tasse.

Joe admitted the justice of the rebuke to Muggs and Gilly. "He knows, boys. He's getting to be one of the leaders of society."

"And it isn't so easy to get into society as you'd think," boasted Sam. "The Parkers never could have got me in, only every one I met said I was so amusing—and now I'm being invited everywhere."

The hidden meaning of this evaded no one but Sam, and his guests smiled. Mrs. Bascom went to him, to forestall the brutality which exists among men, as a mark of friendship.

"It's been a lovely dinner, Sam," she said.

"Glad you liked it. And we can all afford to have dinners like that every night of our lives——"

"Yes," interrupted Joe. "Look at these four successful men, little lady. Who do you suppose they owe it to?"

She protested laughingly. "You're going to say it's because I always see the jam in the making, when I know you only let me do it just to please me."

"Don't you believe it!" cried Sam.

"Why, Sammy," she disclaimed. "Any one can make it. The only difference is that I put in a little——"

But Joe interrupted her. "Mother! That's a secret!"

"What do you mean, Joe?"

Joe put his arm about her. "I mean," he said tenderly, "you put something into every jar of that jam—something you don't know about yourself, I guess. And if you do, you mustn't tell, or else everybody's mother might do the same thing."

She smiled admiringly at Joe. Unconscious of her own wonder-working, she would have depreciated it, but feared to hurt his feelings. "What a boy you are!" she said, kissing him. And she hurried into the house, to hide her gentle confusion. So the marvellous jam, with all its material and spiritual components, never received due appreciation from its creator.

Mr. Martin returned to his forgotten ritual. "Now, supposin' we join the ladies!" he announced, and started, followed by the boys.

"It's workin' wrong again, Sam," said Muggs.

For the ladies, beautiful, untimely and impatient, appeared around the corner of the house. Mr. Martin drew back with a sigh. And before he could get his society manner in full swing another interruption came—Katie,

with news that his chauffeur was waiting for him at the front gate.

"Supposin' we all go out there," suggested Sam, with over-elaboration of indifference. "Allow me, Betty," and he offered his arm.

"Oh, what is it?" Betty cried, excited by Sam's manner.

"Another of Joe's surprises."

"Perhaps it's fireworks!" piped Jessie.

"Come along, Joe," said Elsie.

"In a minute, dear," replied Joe, and he detained Muggs and Gilly. "I want to see you two a minute," he said.

The others trooped to the front gate. And there was Joe's present for Betty—a little cream-coloured runabout, that was purring complacently, with Sam's chauffeur at the wheel, and Ezra painstakingly smelling of a front tire. It had been concealed at the station until its time to burst like a comet on the delighted Betty.

In contrast to the acclamation in the front yard was quiet sincerity in the back. Joe was addressing his partners.

"I didn't bring a present for you guys," he said. They protested volubly and he went on: "But I thought you'd like a picture to remember

me by," and he broke into their assent by drawing two photographs from his pocket, and presenting them. "Here's yours, Gilly, and here's yours, Muggs," he finished, with deep significance.

Gilly grasped his picture with pleased anticipation, which turned to astonishment as he looked at it. "Joe!" he exclaimed.

"God, Gilly, it's us!" cried Muggs.

"From the Rogues' Gallery!"

"Sure, with our numbers, and everything!"

This had been Joe's business with Callahan, who at that moment was seated in the kitchen calmly nibbling a dessert, of which he could neither recognise the flavour nor pronounce the name. It had been some job for Callahan to get those pictures from the Rogues' Gallery, and he wouldn't take a cent, either. The friends marvelled at Callahan.

Joe knew that the same ineradicable shame his picture had meant to him had been felt by the boys. It did not need the tears in Muggs' voice, nor the feeling in Gilly's, to tell him that, when Muggs said: "Say, old pal, I'm going to remember you for this right up to my time for 'lights out,'" and Gilly: "That goes for me, too!"

Then Betty rushed to them from her present, her radiant joy dispelling their haze of sentiment. "Joe! Joe!" she cried, "Oh, it's wonderful—and the man says I can learn to drive it in no time—Oh, Joe, you're just a darling—I—I—Oh, Joe——!" With her arms around her brother's neck, Betty's voice became as incoherent as that of her runabout, though running on a different mixture—of sobs and laughter.

"Did you see your initials on it?" he asked, and that started her again.

"Are they? Where?"

"On the door."

Betty dashed away, but stopped to call her mother, who appeared on the kitchen porch. "Maw! Maw! I got a new automobile! It's a runaround! And it's got wire wheels, and everything. Hurry, maw, I want to look at my initials!" and away she flew, her mother scurrying after.

"That's being some happy," averred Muggs.

"I've felt like yelling that way ever since I was married," smiled Joe. "I tell you, it's wonderful when—when—Oh!" He broke off, for happiness did not shine on the faces of Muggs and Gilly. Rather there was yearning,

that incomplete romance can bring as keenly to the hearts of guys that haven't always gone straight, as to those who have been falsely accused, and proved innocent. Joe read their expressions aright, and smiled again, as he thought how easy it would be to erase them. "Say, boys, do you remember what you promised me when we went into business together?" he asked.

"About Betty?" asked Muggs.

"And Jessie?" added Gilly.

"Yes."

"And we've stuck to it, Joe," Gilly declared, and Muggs chimed in with: "Sure, we have. We bought two engagement rings, six months ago, but we never said nothin' about 'em."

"Well, that promise is off."

"Off!" Muggs exclaimed.

"Do you mean it?" Gilly cried joyfully.

"You agreed to say nothing until you made good——"

"You think we've made good, Joe, honest?" eagerly demanded Gilly.

"If two fellows ever made good, you have."

"I ain't missed Sunday school in forty weeks," Gilly boasted.

But Joe thought of their making good in

other ways; where things had to be done quickly; where they had to be done well—and where they had to be done both well and quickly. They were indeed competent, as well as soundly moral. "I'll see if I can find the girls for you," he said, as he strolled off.

Muggs began to wonder at the situation. "And now we can ask 'em," he said.

"And we both got bank accounts," declared Gilly.

"And we got 'em on the level," Muggs stated, which seemed most wonderful of all!

After the moment of exultation Mr. Gilbert became thoughtful. "Can't we both ask 'em together?" he quavered.

"What do you mean?"

"Somehow, I don't like the idea of being alone when I ask Jessie."

"Afraid?"

"Scared stiff!"

"Me, too," Muggs acknowledged. "Got your ring?"

"It's up in my room. I'll go and get it."

"Bring mine down, too."

"Sure," said Gilly, but he hesitated. "I think I'll send mine to Jessie in a note," he decided.

Muggs approved this correspondence mode of proposal no more than the duet method. "Oh, you can't propose to a girl that way," he asserted. Then a thought came to him. "I wouldn't mind askin' Jessie."

"I wouldn't mind askin' Betty," responded Gilly. A thought came to him. "Say, Muggs, would you—do that for me?" he faltered.

"Do what? Ask Jessie?"

"I'd do the same for you," Gilly assured him fervently.

"Sh!" cautioned Muggs, for Jessie was coming around the house.

Miss Strong approached, babbling as she came. "Joe asked me to bring Betty out here, but she's off in her car. It's the cutest thing! And she's just wild about it."

Mr. Gilbert regarded his idol, embarrassed. She beamed dazzlingly on him. A wild idea of taking matters into his own hands came to him. "Jessie, I—I"—and as the idea became tame—"I want to get something," Mr. Gilbert finished, and stumbled into the house.

Mr. McCarthy approached the idol, without qualms. "Jessie, how would you like to"—the qualms arrived—"to—er—sit down?"

"Oh, I ain't tired."

"But I want to ask you something."

"Oh!" she at once became interested, and sat on the well seat.

"Have you ever thought about getting married?" Muggs began impersonally.

She looked at him, surprised at this puerile question, and spoke candidly. "Why, of course I have. You don't think I want to die an old maid, do you?"

"No, sure you don't." Muggs was relieved, and sat beside her. "Jessie, would you—will you——"

Jessie rose in astonishment. "Why, Lucius! I—I thought you were in love with Betty! I couldn't marry you," she said emphatically.

"I don't want you to marry me," he replied, with unflattering haste. "I'm askin' you for Gilly."

"You're what?" she gasped.

"Yes, he made me promise I would."

Amazement made her dumb, for an instant, then anger gave her speech. "Well, of all the meanest things—I'll never speak to him again as long as I live——" and she flirted out of the yard, choking with the rage which her anger had become.

Muggs called after her, "Jessie, wait a minute, listen——" but she did not heed.

Again he sat on the well seat and considered the matter. He knew Jessie's anger was directed toward Gilly, so he was calm. He had learned something, so he was cheered.

Gilly, from the kitchen door, hissed cautiously at his substitute: "Tch! Tch!" Muggs looked up. Gilly saw that he was alone, went to him and asked anxiously: "Did you fix it?"

"Yes, I fixed it," Muggs replied blandly.

"Which way did she go?"

"That way."

Gilly started joyously toward the front yard, but returned at once, with the manner of a conspirator. "Here comes Betty," he whispered. "Blow, quick!"

Muggs rose, and as Gilly tried to push him toward the orchard, spoke with brutality: "Blow yourself."

"But you fixed it for me, now I want to fix it for you," insisted Gilly.

"I'll do my own fixin'," Muggs assured him. "Beat it, get out!" and he pushed Gilly away, as Betty entered.

"Jessie wants to see you, Dudley," she said.

"You better go right away; she's awful mad about something."

Doubt and fear tugged at Gilly's heart and feet. "Thanks," he said dubiously, and started slowly, but Muggs stopped him with a whispered: "Did you get that?" Gilly looked at him dully. "Eh? Oh! Here," and he handed Muggs his engagement ring. "You must have fixed it fine," he muttered, and dragged himself toward the front yard.

"Why didn't you come to see my car, Lucius?" Betty asked.

"I was detained," he answered brightly. And in this, the greatest moment of his life, Muggs resorted to strategy. He drew the diamond engagement ring from its little leather box, and, turning partly away from Betty, regarded it attentively. He examined it critically. He rubbed the stone on his coat sleeve to enhance its brilliance. Betty, a doubtful little smile on her lips, peeped over his shoulder, with an alert, bird-like interest. It can be conceived that she knew what was coming. The examination and brightening over, Muggs turned to her. "I got something terrible important to say to you," he began.

"Hello!" cried Joe, as he and Elsie joined the couple.

Muggs continued his important communication: "Will you take a little walk in the orchard, Betty?" He offered her his arm, then threw a sop to Elsie and Joe. "Excuse us a minute," he said, and he and Betty moved gaily out under the blossoms.

"I guess they don't want any one around, just now," Joe smiled.

And Elsie archly replied: "We didn't."

"Happy?"

She sighed luxuriously. "Oh, isn't it a wonderful world!"

"Look!" said Joe, and he turned her toward their Hill.

And there, from its slanting roof, its low veranda, its façade, its dim windows, from "turret to foundation stone," the house of their dreams, now a reality, beamed a welcome to them. It seemed impossible that mere bricks, mortar, stones, lumber and shingles could form such a home-like structure—and they could not. For unknown to its builders and its owners some of the ingredients that flavoured Mis' Bascom's jam had crept into this House-That-Joe-Built; and with the love that was now to in-

habit it, it would fittingly crown the hill, once more renamed—The Hill of Dreams Come True.

"Home!" murmured Elsie.

"Home!" echoed Joe. "Isn't it a wonderful world!"

"Joey," called Mrs. Bascom, coming to him. "Sammy is going to take Mr. Callahan home. They're waiting to say good-night to you, out in the automobile."

"Well, we'll go and say good-night to them, and we'll get Sam to take us over——" he paused and looked at Elsie, longing to hear the word again—"over——"

"Home!" she murmured, her eyes shining, as Joe took her in his arms and kissed her.

So they kissed and said good-night to Mrs. Bascom, and Elsie, who had a mother again, now, called her "mother," and the little lady watched them go. And before her tender smile faded Jessie Strong dashed to her, followed by the sheepish Gilly, extending a left-hand finger on which a diamond glittered, crying, "Oh, Mrs. Bascom, I want to show you something!"

"Oh, my dear, I'm so glad," she responded, but before she could embrace Jessie, Betty

dashed on from the orchard, with a like finger extended, with a like adornment.

"My darling girl!" cried Mrs. Bascom, kissing Betty.

Then Betty and Jessie compared rings, with girlish ejaculations, and embraced. And Muggs and Gilly compared happiness, with manly exclamations, and embraced; and it seemed that these two, waifs no longer, had found a mother, for when Mrs. Bascom slipped into their arms, they called her "mother!"

Well, they were gone. Jessie and Gilly cooed their way through the orchard, as he took her home. Muggs and Betty cooed on the front veranda. Mrs. Bascom looked over at the House-That-Joe-Built. Sammy Martin's car crept up the Hill of Dreams Come True, heralded by a fan-like ray of light. It stopped for a moment to drop Joe and Elsie, then went on toward the dangerous City.

A light sprang out of a lower window of the House, showed briefly against the dusk, and faded. Mrs. Bascom smiled, and watched. A light sprang from an upper window of the House, gleamed for a moment, and was slowly eclipsed by a downward-drawn shade. Mrs. Bascom's tender smile had become wistful now.

Perchance she was thinking of the time she came up the hill to this house as a bride. She sighed softly. Who could tell what she was thinking? Perhaps another mother might—if she would.

Two bachelors, Sam Martin and Callahan, whirled toward the City in Sam's car. The owner liked the detective because he was competent, Callahan liked Sam because he was original. Sammy chattered gaily as they went, and Callahan responded quietly. But in time a silence fell upon them.

The car whirred on, through the scented night, its lights yellowing the dusty road, at the curves picking out vignettes of grey stone wall, gnarled tree trunks, or bunches of blossoms. Sammy's cigar tip glowed intermittently in the gloom. It was a time for sentiment, but it seemed incredible that it should have overtaken him.

At last Callahan asked lightly: "Anything on your mind?"

"I was thinking of Joe and Elsie, and something that might happen," he replied abstractedly.

Callahan turned to him. "Something happen?"

But Sammy mused on. The perfume of lilacs enveloped the car for a moment. A rabbit, trapped in the shafts of light, rushed panic-stricken from side to side of the road. Then finding shelter in a hedge, it sat for an instant's pause in flight, ears erect, nose twitching, paws pressed over a palpitating heart, and watched the strange monster whirl by.

Sammy's cigar glowed softer. His thoughts roamed to the four hundred, and to their nomenclature, then back to Joe and Elsie. When he spoke again it was as though answering a question.

"If it's a boy, 'Joseph Bascom, Second,' would sound fine," he said.

THE END

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